P. o. angl. Norris

251 at

P. o. angl. 251 al

EACH VOLUME SOLD SEPARATELY.

COLLECTION
OF
BRITISH AUTHORS

TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

VOL. 2737.

MISADVENTURE BY W. E. NORRIS.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. 1.

LEIPZIG: BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ.
PARIS: C. REINWALD & CIE, 15, RUE DES SAINTS-PÈRES.
PARIS: THE GALIGNANI LIBRARY, 224, RUE DE RIVOLI,
AND AT NICE, 16, QUAI MASSENA.

18 F

This Collection
is published with copyright for Continental circulation, but all
purchasers are earnestly requested not to introduce the volumes

BAYERISCHE
STAATS-
BIBLIOTHEK
MUENCHEN

COLLECTION

OF

BRITISH AUTHORS

TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

VOL. 2737.

MISADVENTURE BY W. E. NORRIS.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

By the same Author,

MY FRIEND JIM	1 vol.
A BACHELOR'S BLUNDER	2 vols.
MAJOR AND MINOR	2 vols.
THE ROGUE	2 vols.
MISS SHAFTO	2 vols.
MRS. FENTON	1 vol.

MISADVENTURE

BY

W. E. NORRIS,

AUTHOR OF "MY FRIEND JIM," "MAJOR AND MINOR,"

ETC. ETC.

COPYRIGHT EDITION.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1891.

BIBLIOTHECA
REGIA
MONACENSIS

CONTENTS

OF VOLUME I.

			Page
CHAPTER	I.	Mr. Bligh	7
—	II.	Miss Bligh	20
—	III.	The Heir-Apparent	31
—	IV.	Madame Souravieff	43
—	V.	Mark's Lawyer	53
—	VI.	Archie goes out fishing	66
—	VII.	The Arrival of the Alien	76
—	VIII.	Cicely is interested	88
—	IX.	Morton represents the Family	99
—	X.	Cicely has poor Sport	110
—	XI.	Coppard in Trouble	122
—	XII.	Lady Dare's Ball	133
—	XIII.	Bobby is put out of Suspense	144
—	XIV.	Mr. Bligh states his Intentions	154
—	XV.	Mark makes Peace	166

			Page
CHAPTER	XVI.	Archie's Triumph	177
—	XVII.	Morton scandalises his Host	190
—	XVIII.	Fortuna sævo læta negotio	203
—	XIX.	"Death by Misadventure"	212
—	XX.	Archie returns	225
—	XXI.	Coppard's Conjectures	234
—	XXII.	Victor reappears	246
—	XXIII.	Mark's Tenant	256
—	XXIV.	Madame Souravieff is criticised . . .	266
—	XXV.	Sir Peter shakes his Head	278

MISADVENTURE.

CHAPTER I.

MR. BLIGH.

"It is all very well," observed Mr. Bligh, "to say I am not responsible; and perhaps in a certain sense I am not. Looking back upon the past, I suppose I may claim to have done as much for Morton as most fathers do for their sons. I sent him to Eton and Oxford; I have always made him a handsome allowance; I have paid his debts for him several times with more or less of cheerfulness; I even remember that, when he was a boy, I whipped him twice—the second time rather severely—for acts of wanton cruelty to animals. Moreover, he has had the full benefit of my experience of life and my large philosophy, while you, my dear Lowndes, have, I know, preached your very best sermons, both doctrinal and practical, at him. If, after all this, he has chosen to go to the deuce, the consequences should be upon his own head, you think. But then comes the question of how far any of us are

answerable for our proclivities, or ought to be punished for the natural results of them."

The speaker was a man whom most people would have pronounced at first sight to be nearer seventy than sixty, because his hair and his short beard were as white as snow, and because the clear, pale skin of his face was furrowed by such deep lines; but closer inspection conveyed the idea that these were lines of suffering, and that he was probably younger than he looked. As a matter of fact, he had at this time only just turned his fifty-first year. He was reclining, as he did all day long, in a wheeled chair close to a bay-window, whence he could survey some part of the broad lands which he owned but could not tread. Long periods of neuralgic or rheumatic pain (so called by the doctors, who could find neither a cause nor a cure for them) had culminated at length in what all the doctors were agreed in describing as creeping paralysis, and had changed into a frail worn-out wreck of humanity one whom many middle-aged people could remember as a keen sportsman, a first-rate judge of a horse and a very popular frequenter of London drawing-rooms. Even now he had not lost all trace of the good looks for which he had once been famous, nor had disease, trouble and disappointment robbed his smile of its good-humoured kindliness.

His friend, Mr. Lowndes, the Rector of Abbotsport, was his senior by some half-dozen years or so, and looked capable of outliving him by a quarter of a century at least. Tall, broad-shouldered and ruddy, his thick black hair and whiskers being only here and there streaked with grey, Mr. Lowndes, had it not been

for the clerical garb that he wore, would have had a good deal more of the appearance of a country squire than the crippled invalid whom he sat facing, with a hand on each knee. He said:

"Now, Bligh, you are going to mount one of your fantastic hobbies. You want to excuse and explain everything upon some fanciful theory of inherited tendency, which can't hold water for a single moment. Added to which, you are paying a poor compliment to your forefathers by assuming that Morton inherited his tendencies from them. He certainly didn't get them from you."

"I should be sorry to be uncomplimentary to my forefathers," said Mr. Bligh, with a smile, "but for anything I know to the contrary, there may have been some scoundrels amongst them. And I don't see anything fantastic or fanciful in stating an undeniable fact. You haven't bred as many horses as I have, still you are not ignorant about the subject, and I believe you have bred dogs. You know as well as I do what an important part hereditary tendency plays in that matter, and how often it crops up in an individual after lying dormant for generations."

"We're not talking of horses and dogs," returned Mr. Lowndes, "we're talking of a human being, with a soul and a conscience and a free will. We all of us have our besetting sins, I suppose—though I'm sure I don't know what yours can be—but our business is to conquer them, and if we fail we deserve to suffer for our cowardice. Suppose I have inherited a tendency to some disease—gout, for instance—am I to shrug my

shoulders and give in, instead of taking measures to counteract it?"

"Judging by my own experience, I should be inclined to back the disease," said the other. "And then you must allow that we don't all start at even weights."

"Oh, well," said the Rector, a little impatiently—for he was vexed with himself for having made use of an illustration which sounded somewhat unfeeling under the circumstances—"we needn't argue the point, because I am sure that we don't really differ. Excuses, no doubt, can be made for everybody, and let us hope that eventually they will be made. Meanwhile, with our imperfect knowledge of things, we are obliged to judge by what is apparent; and as for Morton—well, I will only say, as I said before, that I wish you wouldn't have him down here. He has refused scores of times when you have asked him; why should you accept his proposal now, when you are ill and when the sight of him is quite enough to make you worse?"

"Oh, I don't think the sight of him will produce that effect upon me," said Mr. Bligh, quietly.

"I do, then; I have known you too long, my dear Bligh, to be taken in by your affectation of stoicism. In all my life I have never met a man who bore pain better or who felt it more. Morton will give you pain every time he opens his lips—you know he will. What's more, he will try to give you pain."

"Perhaps not. I imagine his object in paying us this visit is quite the reverse of that."

"What is his object?" inquired the Rector, who, however, could have answered his own question easily enough.

Mr. Bligh laughed. "After all," he said, "it is only what you and I should do under similar circumstances. Given a dying father, who has absolute control over the disposal of his property, shouldn't we think it our duty to seek him out and express to him a sincere regret for any little differences which might have arisen between us and him?"

"No," answered the Rector, stoutly; "neither you nor I would stoop to such meanness. Besides, you are not dying."

"So the doctors are kind enough to assure me. They say that I may live for a great many more years: but they think it will be a very strange thing if I do. Doctors, of course, can't tell the real truth, but there is no reason that I know of why patients shouldn't, when they happen to be aware of it. The real truth is always bracing and invigorating, though I admit that it often looks rather ugly from a distance; and the truth, I take it, is that Morton is coming because he has heard that his cousin Archie is here, and because that has very naturally alarmed him."

Mr. Lowndes had a pair of round, projecting, brown eyes, which now became rounder and projected themselves somewhat more prominently than usual. "Do you mean to say," he began, "that you really propose—"

"Oh no, I don't think it would be right or wise, or in any way desirable. All the same I wish Archie were my son. Even though he is younger than Morton, I might perhaps be justified in making an elder son of him in this case; but nephews, I suppose, must be re-

garded as out of the question. What do you think of him?"

"I think he is a fine, manly young fellow: I always did think so, and soldiering has improved him immensely. Still, as you say, he is only your nephew. I should have thought—will you allow me to speak my mind plainly to you, Bligh?"

"Haven't I just told you that the unvarnished truth is full of fascination for me?"

"Well, then, I should have thought that if you considered your son unworthy to succeed you—which he most undoubtedly is—you could have left this place to your daughter. I know you can provide for her amply without doing that, and I know that the management of a large property is a heavy burden to place on the shoulders of a young girl. Still, when one has to face two evils one can but choose the smaller; and although Cicely is inexperienced, and a little headstrong at times, her heart is in the right place. And then she will marry. Surely it would be better for us all to have decent Christian people at the Priory than an avowed atheist."

"Is Morton an avowed atheist?"

"If he isn't he ought to be. Holding the views that he does, and living the life that he lives, he has no business to call himself anything else."

"Ah, I think I remember that he once got rather the better of you in a theological discussion."

"No, he didn't," returned the Rector, reddening slightly, "he didn't get the better of me at all. Of course he asked me questions which I couldn't answer; any Sunday school child could do that—and indeed

they often do. The times that I have been bothered with that tiresome old difficulty about the rainbow and its appearance in waterfalls and fountains! Why, only last week a wretched little whipper-snapper wanted me to explain how it was that Balaam showed so little surprise when his ass entered into conversation with him."

"I have always felt a good deal of curiosity upon that point myself," observed Mr. Bligh. "What did you say?"

"I said that Balaam was a prophet, that he was accustomed to supernatural manifestations, and that an incident of that kind wouldn't be at all likely to astonish him. Then, if you please, my young gentleman wanted to know whether the mouth and tongue of an ordinary donkey were so formed that it would be possible for it to produce sounds resembling articulate speech. He didn't put it in those words, but that was the gist of his inquiries. Now I only mention this to show you how easy it is for a mere child to throw doubts upon the truth of the Scripture narrative."

"I quite see that it is very easy indeed," replied Mr. Bligh, gravely; "but we are wandering away from our rival candidates. Not that Archie is a conscious candidate—at least I hope he isn't."

"I am perfectly sure that no such notion has ever entered his head," cried the Rector, warmly.

"There is no occasion to be so sure as all that; such a notion might have entered his head without disgracing either it or his heart. I only meant to say that I hoped for his sake that he didn't cherish expectations which are so very unlikely to be fulfilled."

There was a pause of a few moments, after which Mr. Bligh resumed: "It will be rather amusing to watch them."

"To watch whom?" asked the Rector.

"Archie and Morton. Of course they will fight; Morton will take good care of that. But Morton never loses his temper, whereas Archie is decidedly peppery. I should say that Archie would get the worst of it."

"I don't see what there will be amusing in that," grunted Mr. Lowndes, who was a very straightforward, matter-of-fact sort of person, and did not sympathise with all his friend's moods. "I wish you wouldn't say such things, Bligh. They sound—not to me, because I know you—but to other people they might sound a little bit malicious."

"Cripples are always malicious," said Mr. Bligh; "they can't help it. So long as one lives one is bound to get some sort of fun out of existence; and what sort of fun is there within the reach of a man who has lost the use of his legs, except studying his fellow-creatures and laughing in his sleeve at them? I lie here on my back from morning to night and watch you—Cicely and Archie and the servants, and the people who come to call, and your reverend and respected self. You have no idea how funny you all are."

"Well, I'm glad that I'm not the only subject of ridicule, at all events," observed Mr. Lowndes, with a somewhat dissatisfied look. "What makes us so funny, if I may ask?"

"You would have to break your back before you could understand; and that perhaps is rather too long a price to pay for the privilege. I'm completely out of

it, don't you see; I'm still alive, though I'm as good—or as bad—as dead; and that gives me a fine sense of the triviality of everything that excites the rest of you. What does it all matter? In quite a short time the whole generation of us will be wiped out and clean forgotten; isn't it a little comical that we should make so much ado about nothing?"

This (as possibly it may have been intended to do) drew from the Rector an eloquent vindication of the seriousness of life and the far-reaching consequences of every individual act. Furthermore, he thought fit to wind up with a final application of his remarks. "You have no right to say that you are 'out of it,' Bligh: on the contrary, very great power for good or for evil remains in your hands. The temporal, and for aught I know the eternal welfare of many people depends upon you, and you can't joke yourself free from your responsibilities. I think you ought to bear that in mind and consider it carefully before you decide to nominate as your successor a man who will—who will—"

"Who will play the deuce generally," suggested Mr. Bligh. "Well, I'll consider it—and him too. He seems to have challenged consideration, so that he can't complain. Nevertheless, I doubt whether any conceivable arrangement that I could make would be wholly satisfactory.".

The Rector sighed and went sorrowfully away. He was very much afraid that his old friend's days were numbered; he was pretty sure that his old friend would not set established custom aside in making his will, and he was quite convinced that infinite harm might

be done in the parish of Abbotsport by such a Squire as Morton Bligh would be.

"It's all very unfortunate," he muttered to himself as he mounted his brown cob—"very unfortunate indeed!"

When he had ambled down the long, gently sloping approach, bordered on either side by rhododendrons, which were one of the chief glories of the Priory, and when he had passed through an iron gate, which separated lawns, shrubberies and flower-beds from the park, he turned his horse off the road and cantered across the grass, until he reached a point from which he could look down upon the slate roofs of Abbotsport and the blue veil of smoke which hung motionless over them on that still afternoon of early spring. The little fishing village, overhung by lofty chalk cliffs and protected both from easterly and from westerly gales by sheltering promontories, had been made additionally safe and snug by a breakwater, constructed some years back at the expense of Mr. Bligh. The same munificent benefactor had supplied the inhabitants with the solid school-house, which Mr. Lowndes could descry, and had carried out a great many other works of public utility during his reign. There had always been Blighs at the Priory, and they had always owned the whole of Abbotsport; but they had been far less powerful, because far less wealthy, than the present holder of the estate, who, while still a young man, had inherited a large fortune from his mother's family. That he had spent his income wisely and well could not be denied. He had found Abbotsport poverty-stricken, dirty and over-populated, and by dint of judicious expenditure,

combined with some exercise of authority, which had been at first resented, but subsequently acquiesced in (because improved circumstances always promote a spirit of toleration), he had converted the community over which he ruled into a prosperous and contented one. He had been a benevolent despot, but like other benevolent despots he laboured under the disadvantage of being mortal; so that there could be no certainty of the work which he had inaugurated being carried on.

"Besides, I am not sure that he hasn't sapped their independence," mused the rector, as he gazed down on the little fleet of fishing smacks, which were stealing in before a very light, southerly breeze. "They have got too much into the habit of looking to the Priory for help the moment that anything goes wrong, and it's precious little help they are likely to get from Morton Bligh. Cicely would take care that their wants were supplied, at any rate, though no doubt she would be injudicious, and she has inherited her father's disinclination to be guided by advice. Still she would be sure to marry before long; and if she had a husband who was a decent fellow"—Mr. Lowndes paused for a moment in his meditation and tapped his boot pensively with the handle of his riding-whip. "Now, if Cicely would marry her cousin," he resumed presently, "and I strongly suspect that her cousin wouldn't object to the arrangement—Good gracious, Archie, how you made me jump! You ought to know better than to play such tricks upon an old man whose reins are hanging loose. It's lucky that nothing ever startles the cob."

The young man, who had playfully thrown a fir-cone at the Rector's broad back, laughed and said: "The

cob's ears are quicker than yours, Mr. Lowndes; he knew I was behind you two or three minutes ago."

This young man, who was tall, spare and broad-shouldered, and had a slight, fair moustache, with an upward twist to it, bore the marks of his profession as plainly as if he had been dressed in full cavalry uniform. Without being exactly good-looking, he possessed the beauty which belongs to youth and physical vigour, and he had a pleasant, smart, sunburnt appearance. Also his blue eyes seemed to belong to an honest mortal. "What were you dreaming about?" he asked. "About the future fate of that intemperate flock of yours?"

"Well, yes," answered the Rector: "I was thinking about their future, poor fellows! Not that they are so very intemperate, except now and then, when they have had a great catch of fish, and even at such times they are a good deal better than they used to be. Nevertheless, I sometimes feel anxious about them. I've just seen your uncle, and he tells me that Morton is expected at the Priory this evening."

"Yes, I believe so; it's rather a bore. I don't know much about him, but I've always understood that he is an awful blackguard."

"He isn't so much that—at least not in the way that you probably mean. There's always hope for the sort of man whom you would call an awful blackguard."

"Oh! And isn't there any hope for Morton?"

The Rector shook his head. "I'll tell you what Morton is," said he; "he's a thoroughly bad-hearted fellow. You may have heard stories about him. I don't want to enter upon them, and indeed they are stories of a sort which you young fellows don't generally

mention before parsons. It would be very wrong of me and quite against my duty and my conscience to make light of sin of any kind; yet there *is* a difference, you know. A man may be chivalrous in spite of his wickedness. It isn't very long since Sir James Hannen addressed Morton Bligh from the Bench in words which—which, upon my honour, I think I would rather have been hanged than have heard addressed to me. But I don't believe he cared."

"Everybody said he behaved thundering badly," observed the young man. "I was in India at the time, you know; so I only heard about it through the newspapers. Was that why Uncle Wilfrid quarrelled with him?"

"Oh, there wasn't any quarrel. Your uncle never quarrels; and if he had meant to wash his hands of Morton, as most fathers would have done, he might have found ample excuse for that years ago. I don't mind telling you that that is what I should have done. As a general principle, I am opposed to placing women in positions of authority, but supposing I had to choose between Cicely and Morton my choice would be very soon made."

"Only Cicely will marry some day, I suppose."

"Yes; but when she does, her husband won't have things all his own way. That fortunate fellow—because he will be a very fortunate fellow—may as well make up his mind to accept the part of a prince-consort."

The Rector looked rather hard at his companion, who gazed imperturbably out to sea, and then he added, with an abrupt chuckle: "Put that in your pipe and smoke it, young man."

CHAPTER II.

MISS BLIGH.

The young lady who Mr. Lowndes had quite accurately described as possessing a strong will of her own was, at the time when she was being thus criticised, discharging one of the duties incident to her station in life, by visiting the poor. There were always plenty of poor people in the village of Abbotsport, which, being situated at a distance of three miles (and mostly up-hill miles) from the nearest railway station, could not dispose of its fish with the ease and profit enjoyed by some of its neighbours on the south coast. However, they were none of them destitute, nor in any danger of becoming so, because they had Miss Cicely Bligh, as well as her father, to look after them. Whenever Miss Cicely walked down to the village (and that was three or four times a week on an average) she carried on her arm a basket, which was heavy on leaving the Priory and light on its return. For this reason she was always a welcome visitor; and if her instructions and rebukes were rather more peremptory than some folks thought becoming in one so young, yet they were magnanimous enough to pardon her in consideration of her pretty face and her kind heart, and smiled with good-humoured toleration, when her back was turned, at her mania for cleanliness, her determination that everybody should go to church once a week, and all her other little fads and fancies. In reality, the housewives of Abbotsport were mortally afraid of her,

though they would have died rather than admit such a thing.

It mattered very little to Cicely whether they admitted or denied a circumstance of which she was fully aware. She knew that she could always carry her point, whatever it might be, and the only thing she regretted was that people should ever waste time by arguing with her, when it would have been so much more simple and sensible to give in at once. To be sure she shared the inestimable boon, with which Abbotsport at large was blessed, of being seldom pressed for time. On this particular afternoon she had gone her rounds and had administered her charities, together with a few necessary scoldings, as usual, and now she thought she would stroll down to the harbour and see the trawlers come in. So she made her way along the steep streets to the water side—a natty, well-proportioned, and very upright little figure, with her long sable boa flung back over her shoulders and her empty basket swinging.

Cicely Bligh had the family features, which were such as the family had no reason to complain of. Her nose was slightly aquiline; but it was such a diminutive specimen of that class that nobody with the slightest sense of the fitness of terms would have dared to call it a hook. Her upper lip, which was very short, had an outward curve; the lower one was somewhat full; her chin was perfectly rounded, without being too prominent, her dark eyebrows were straight, and from beneath them there looked forth a pair of large, steadfast, grey eyes, for the discomfiture of evil-doers and the sad undoing of susceptible young men. She was, beyond all reach of rivalry, the beauty of the county; and how

could she help knowing it when she had been told as much such a number of times? She did not, however, value herself so much upon her good looks—which were hers by clear right of inheritance, and therefore not worth boasting about—as upon her strict integrity of purpose, and her truly remarkable accuracy of judgment. To these fine qualities she flattered herself that her claim was undisputed; and so, in truth, it was, because nobody wanted to dispute it with her. From her father—the only human being to whom she owed or owned allegiance—she met with little or no opposition, her views and tastes being fortunately very much the same as his own. Illness had of late so incapacitated him that he had been compelled to manage a great part of his affairs vicariously, and from being his delegate his daughter had insensibly become his substitute. As for her aunt, Miss Skipwith, who had been asked to stay a few weeks at the Priory soon after Mrs. Bligh's death and who had remained there for fifteen years, Cicely had never been told to regard that lady as placed in authority over her, and had never dreamt of doing so. Thus she was about as independent as a young woman can be; and perhaps rather more so than it is good for any young woman to be, seeing that the absolute equality of the sexes has not yet been admitted, even in the most progressive countries.

The trawlers, of which Abbotsport boasted but four, had already entered the harbour when she reached it, and a knot of more or less interested persons had collected on the pier, to watch them discharge their load of fish and to help in carting it away. This was a somewhat lengthy operation—because, as has been men-

tioned, Abbotsport disdained hurry—but Cicely waited patiently until it was almost completed, when she caught sight of a weather-beaten, grey-bearded man, who touched the brim of his sou'-wester to her with a slightly deprecating air.

"Coppard," said she, fixing her eyes upon him severely, "I am surprised to see you going out with the trawlers among these boys. I should have thought you might have found some better employment than that."

"You're right there, Miss," answered the man, "as you mostly are. Come to my time o' life, better employment I ought to have, and that's Gospel truth. But food must be purvided for the young 'uns some way or other, and times is terrible bad just now."

"Times are bad with you, you mean," interrupted Cicely, "and no wonder! I didn't see you at church on Sunday, Coppard."

"You did not, Miss," replied Mr. Coppard, with a great show of straightforward candour. "You did not see me, for the reason that I were not there. I were very porely o' Sunday and compelled for to keep my bed."

"You couldn't expect to be anything else after having been disgracefully intoxicated all Saturday."

"What?—me, Miss?" cried Mr. Coppard in extreme astonishment. "Me disgracefully intox—well I never! Who could ha' been and told you such a thing as that about me in my habsence?"

"The same person who told me that you had sold your share in the *Rover* and spent all the money. It really is too bad, Coppard."

"So 'tis, Miss; and a great refreshment it has been

to me to get two nights at sea beyond reach o' that there woman's tongue. 'Spent all the money' says she! And her with a new gownd to her back—as you might ha' noticed o' Sunday, Miss, and did notice, I make no doubt. But she's well known far and wide for what she is, and there ain't a six year old child in Abbotsport as pays any manner o' heed to *her* talk."

"When I have seen that new gown I shall believe that poor Mrs. Coppard got it from you," observed Miss Bligh, placidly. "I am afraid it is useless to remonstrate with you, and certainly it is quite useless to try and help you. I am very sorry now that I asked my father to buy a share in the *Rover* for you."

"Now don't 'ee say that, Miss. Squire he hacted for the best—likewise yourself; but as for getting a living out of part share in a hopen boat, t'aint to be thought of, Miss; and what I do I do for the sake of my family, as should be more grateful to me."

"I really think there is something in that, Miss Bligh," chimed in a gentle and deferential voice from the background. "A man must catch a great many dabs and congers before he can expect to get a fair day's wages for a fair day's work."

Cicely whisked round sharply, and was thus brought face to face with a young man in a blue serge suit, who took off his cap to her. He was a young man of something under middle height, square-built, clean-shaven and fresh-complexioned. He was as evidently a sailor as Archie Bligh was a soldier, and if a little less smart-looking than that gentleman was certainly handsomer, his features being quite classic in their regularity, and his big brown eyes almost as expressive

as a dog's. Cicely held out her hand to him with a little air of condescension and patronage. "Oh, how do you do, Bobby?" said she. "Have you been out with the trawlers?"

"That he has, Miss," answered Coppard, who perhaps was not unwilling to bring about a change of subject; "and though I don't care to flatter no one, I will say there's not a many officers in Her Majesty's Navy as can sail a boat like Captain Dare."

"Not *Captain* Dare, surely," said Cicely. "I know you are no longer a midshipman, Bobby, but I didn't know you had jumped up quite so high as that."

"Sub-lieutenant," answered the individual entitled to that rank, modestly. Then he added, in an apologetic tone, "I can't be so near blue water without wanting to be upon it; so as these fellows offered to take me trawling with them, I thought I would go and see what it was like. We've had good luck and fine weather, I am glad to say; but it must be a hard life in the winter-time."

Bobby Dare was one of the many sons of Sir George Dare, who shared with Mr. Bligh the pre-eminence in the southern county where the properties of both of them were situated. Cicely had known Bobby all her life, and was well aware that he had humbly adored her from his infancy. She said: "I don't think I should much care to spend a night on board a trawler. How did you manage about washing and dressing in the morning?"

"Well, I jumped overboard and had a swim," said the young man. "Do I look very grubby?"

Cicely took a calm and deliberate survey of him

from head to foot. "Not more so than might have been expected," she replied, at length. "And so Coppard has been talking you over? I daresay he would find it easy enough to do that."

The young sailor laughed, pushed his cap to the back of his head and glanced over his shoulder. Perceiving that Coppard had judiciously effected a movement of retreat he said: "I confess that I have a sneaking affection for that old rascal. I suppose he gets drunk now and then, like the rest of them, and I know he's an arrant poacher; but for all that he's a fine seaman. So are most of these fellows, for that matter. Oh, dear! what a pity it is that press-gangs have been done away with!"

"If you could kidnap our fishermen they would be very much thrown away in the navy, I think," Cicely declared. "What is the use of fine seamanship on board one of those hideous iron hulks that you call men-of-war? Besides, you never have any fighting to do."

"Perhaps we shall, though, one of these days," returned Mr. Dare, hopefully. "Even as it is, we often have to help the soldiers out ashore."

"In skirmishes with savages, you mean? But isn't that rather poor fun? You see, you are quite certain of being able to beat them, with the weapons that you have. If I were a man I would much rather be in the cavalry, like Archie," said Cicely, to provoke him.

But Bobby was of far too simple and modest a nature to be irritated by such malicious attacks.

"It is a matter of taste," said he. "We can't be all in the cavalry, and I shouldn't have done for it

even if the governor could have stood the expense, because I never could make head or tail of a horse. But I dare say I shall do my duty as well as Archie when the time comes. At least I hope so."

"Of course you will do it a great deal better, you dear, stupid old Bobby!" said Miss Bligh, who always chose to talk to this neighbour of hers as though he had been much younger than herself. "You belong to the class out of which heroes are made, and will certainly end your career as an Admiral of the Fleet and a G.C.B., if only we give you the chance of distinguishing yourself by fighting the French or the Russians or somebody. Archie isn't that sort of person at all. One can't fancy Archie flourishing a Field Marshal's bâton, and I'm sure he doesn't want such a thing."

A slight flush of pleasure had overspread Mr. Dare's cheeks when he heard himself described as a potential hero, but he did not appear to be altogether satisfied with Cicely's criticisms upon her cousin.

"You must like him very much, or you wouldn't run him down," was his comment upon them.

"What do you mean?" asked the girl, with a wondering look.

"Only that I think you often run down the people whom you care for. You don't mind giving a little pat on the back to the others—such as myself."

"You are rather rude, and rather ungrateful," Cicely remarked. "I am not at all in the habit of running anybody down, except, just occasionally, a few persons who deserve it; but I certainly do like Archie very much. Have you any objection to my liking him?"

Bobby did object very strongly to her entertaining

anything beyond a sisterly affection for her cousin. But he could hardly say so without proceeding to further statements which he was not prepared to make on the spur of the moment; so he only said, rather despondingly, "Archie is the sort of fellow whom everybody is bound to like."

"Aunt Susan doesn't," said Cicely, laughing; "she calls him a 'designing young man.'"

"Oh—Miss Skipwith! But then she hardly counts, does she? I mean, of course, she is a good old thing and all that, only nobody pays much attention to her."

"No, nobody pays much attention to her," agreed Cicely, in a somewhat grave voice.

During the above conversation they had been moving slowly away from the quay, and were now mounting the steep street which led in the direction of the Priory. It did not lead towards Instowe, where Sir George Dare lived; but perhaps Bobby was not eager to take the shortest way home.

"Why does she call Archie designing?" he asked presently.

"Oh, I suppose she thinks that my father will make him his heir instead of Morton. One can't wonder at her thinking so. My father won't do it, but it is what a great many people would do."

After this there was silence for some minutes. Then Bobby said, "My sisters told me that your brother was expected down here. Is that true?"

"Yes; he wrote to propose it himself, and he is to arrive this evening. Probably he has the same idea as Aunt Susan and thinks it is time for him to bestir himself." After a pause the girl resumed: "I don't feel

as if he were my brother at all. I have only seen him twice in my life, and I didn't like him. Is it wrong, I wonder, to dislike one's brother when he is so very disagreeable?"

"It can't be wrong, or you wouldn't do it," answered Bobby, with conspicuous imbecility. "Besides," he continued, "I never met anyone who didn't hate Morton. It is just like him to make up to poor Mr. Bligh at the last, after turning his back upon him all these years."

Now this was a perfectly true and justifiable speech, but the effect of it upon Cicely was not quite what the speaker could have wished. "What do you mean by 'the last?'" she exclaimed, turning upon him angrily. "It is abominable of you to say such things! I don't mind the people in the village, because it is their way of showing sympathy, and when they are in the least ill they always think they must be going to die; but you have no right to be so stupid, and so——so brutal. You must know perfectly well that my father is not a bit worse than he was a year ago. Don't you know it?"

Bobby might have replied that he had been afloat a year ago, and consequently had not seen Mr. Bligh at the time referred to; also, if he had been strictly honest he would have had to say that he thought Mr. Bligh very ill indeed. But he did neither of these things; he only stammered out in accents of deep contrition, "Oh, I beg your pardon; I'm awfully sorry; I didn't think of what I was saying. I——I daresay he isn't nearly as bad as he looks."

"Well," said Cicely, more calmly, "you know nothing at all about it; that's one comfort. The truth is

that his general health is perfectly good; and although he may never be able to walk again" (here Cicely's eyes suddenly filled with tears and her voice trembled) "there is nothing—nothing at all in his present condition to make us feel alarmed about him. I have Sir Peter Parsons's authority for saying so, and I suppose you will admit that Sir Peter understands his business."

Bobby hastened to declare that he never for a moment thought of setting up his opinion against that of the eminent physician in question. Indeed he was certain that Sir Peter must be right. Still, of course, Morton might think differently.

This explanation having been more or less graciously accepted, he felt encouraged to ask whether Miss Bligh wouldn't like to come out fishing some day. Coppard, he said, had assured him that there was plenty of pollock in the bay, and sometimes one could have a lot of fun with a big conger. "And if it's necessary for you to have a chaperon," he added, a little reluctantly, "perhaps Miss Skipwith would come."

At this Cicely burst out laughing. "I really believe Aunt Susan would rather get on the back of a horse than trust herself in a boat," said she. "I'll go out fishing with you some day, Bobby, and I daresay I may bring Archie with me if he cares to come. I certainly shan't require a chaperon to look after me in the company of my own cousin and a boy like you. Now I have taken you quite far enough out of your way. Good night."

Sub-lieutenant Dare, who was two and twenty years of age, did not quite relish being called a boy, but it was something to have obtained Cicely's assent to his

modest proposition, and it was something to know that Miss Skipwith might be dispensed with. As for Archie, perhaps he wouldn't want to come. "And perhaps if he does come he will be sick," thought the young sailor.

It is thus that love, which is in itself so pure and beautiful a sentiment, is wont to inspire even the most generous minds with ignoble desires.

CHAPTER III.

THE HEIR-APPARENT.

All his life long Archie Bligh had been practically his own master. It is a fate which is usually considered to be undesirable for the young; yet it has its alleviations, and Archie, for his part, had never felt disposed to repine at it. Of his father he had no recollection at all; his mother, who had idolised him and done her best to spoil him (but had not succeeded), had died while he was still at Sandhurst; and as his Uncle Wilfrid thus became his nearest relation, it was natural that he should have spent at the Priory such holiday time as remained to him before he was gazetted to the 24th Lancers. The Priory, indeed, had always been a sort of second home to him, so that when, after an absence of three years in India, he returned with his regiment to his native shores, the first use that he made of his leave was, of course, to betake himself to Abbotsport. Perhaps it was almost equally a matter of course that the first thing he did upon arriving there was to fall over head and ears in love with his cousin Cicely; for there was scarcely a young man within a twenty

mile radius of that enchantress's abode who was not in the same sad case. Archie, to be sure, might have remained exempt, seeing that Cicely and he had been companions as children, and that he had not been at all in love with her then; but that was because his youthful affections had been given to the eldest Miss Dare, who was now approaching her thirtieth year and had never been remarkable for personal beauty.

One cannot be a dashing young cavalry officer and possess a snug little fortune of one's own without having been made the object of flattering attentions on the part of the ladies who frequent garrison towns. Archie, therefore, knew something of women, and thought that he knew a great deal. And this rendered him low-spirited; for his experience convinced him that Cicely had by no means fallen a victim to his attractions. She did not even seem to be aware that he had fallen a victim to hers; although he had done his best to place that fact outside the range of scepticism. She made no stranger of him; she treated him very much as if he had been her brother—not to say her younger brother—she did not exert herself to entertain him, and took it for granted that he could amuse himself in his own way without her help. That very afternoon, when he had offered to accompany her to the village, she had laughed in his face, remarking, "I don't think you could visit any of my poor people without longing to be rid of me, and I am sure I couldn't visit any of them without longing to be rid of you." So he had been reduced to the necessity of taking a solitary walk into the country, which is a very dismal way of spending an afternoon. After his meeting with Mr. Lowndes, he

sauntered down the hill towards Abbotsport, and in due course of time his hopes were fulfilled by the appearance of his cousin, who greeted him from afar with a wave of her empty basket.

"Am I late for dinner?" she asked, when he quickened his pace and joined her. "Did they send you to look for me?"

"Oh dear, no," said Archie, consulting his watch, "there's heaps of time before dinner; I did come to look for you, but that was on my own hook, and because I thought that perhaps, if I had the luck to meet you, you would let me walk home with you. What a long afternoon this has been!"

"Poor fellow!" exclaimed Cicely, with half-ironical compassion; "I suppose it must be desperately slow for you down here. What have you been doing with yourself since luncheon?"

"Nothing, in the fullest sense of the word. And what have you been doing?—if I may ask."

"Well, I have distributed jellies and bunches of grapes to sick people, and I have listened to the domestic woes of Mrs. Coppard, and I have seen the trawlers come in, and I have administered a well-deserved scolding to Coppard, and I have had an interview with Bobby Dare, who, by the way, had returned from a two days' cruise with the fishermen. Just imagine sleeping on board a trawler for pleasure! Why is it that sailors always want to be at sea when they are ashore, and that soldiers hate nothing so much as the sight of a red coat when they are on leave?"

"Because sailors are usually men of one idea," said

Archie, promptly. "Other people like to have a change occasionally."

"And you are beginning to think that you would like a change now, I daresay. I don't wonder at it; only, selfishly speaking, I wish you could bring yourself to stay here until Morton takes his departure. I don't want to have Morton left upon my hands. I don't understand him, and, what is more, I'm afraid of him."

"I don't believe you're afraid of anybody or anything in the world," returned her cousin; "but of course I shall be only too glad to stay here until I'm turned out, and I'll do my best to be civil to your brother."

"Will you?" asked the girl, rather eagerly; "I hope you will. He will certainly try to provoke you, but if you will bear in mind that that is what he wants, and if you will decline to be provoked, you will not only disappoint him but make things much smoother for the rest of us."

"Oh, I'll keep my temper," said Archie, with a laugh. "He seems to be an amiable sort of chap. Why should he want to provoke me?"

Cicely looked at him with a somewhat pitying smile. The reason was so obvious that he might surely have divined it. However, she liked him none the less for his obtuseness and only said: "Morton isn't amiable; he tries to provoke most people. He used to succeed with me; but I don't mean him to succeed again, and I hope he won't with you."

"Does he succeed with Dare?" asked Archie, after a pause.

"I don't think he has ever had the chance; but

anyhow he wouldn't be likely to consider poor Bobby worth powder and shot."

The slightly contemptuous tone in which this opinion was enunciated reassured Archie upon a point as to which he had begun to feel certain misgivings, and when he parted from his cousin and went upstairs to dress for dinner, he felt in a sufficiently good humour to face any number of disagreeable strangers.

The Priory, as regarded a large portion of its outer walls, was an ancient structure; but it had been constantly added to by its present owner, while the interior had been so thoroughly restored, re-modelled, and re-decorated that it was to almost all intents and purposes modern. Many people, of course, thought this a pity, and said so; but then as Mr. Bligh was wont to remark, in answer to these criticisms, they had not been called upon to live in the old house. He and his architect had done their best with the materials at their command. The fine old entrance hall and the broad oak staircase had been left intact, and dark corridors, broken by unexpected steps, still afforded a somewhat dangerous channel of communication with the bedrooms; but, since it had been found impossible to retain the distinctive character of the building in the living-rooms, all attempts to reconcile mediævalism with modern requirements had been abandoned there, and the library, to which Archie betook himself in the course of half an hour, was, as the critics complained, "utterly characterless." It was, however, spacious, cheerful, and sunny, when there was any sun to shine.

It was in this room that Mr. Bligh now spent nearly the whole of the day, and here Archie found him, rest-

ing in his wheeled chair by the bay window, and with a slightly troubled look upon his usually placid face. Beside him sat his sister-in-law, Miss Skipwith, whose face was seldom placid and now displayed signs of unwonted agitation and excitement. "I can't think it wise, Wilfrid," she was saying, as Archie entered.

There were a good many things and there were two people at the Priory which and whom Miss Skipwith could not think wise. She was a thin, anxious, nervous little woman, with fluffy flaxen hair, which was turning grey, and prominent pale blue eyes. She was very much in awe of Mr. Bligh, although she had a poor opinion of his sagacity, and she worshipped her niece, of whose manners and customs she strongly disapproved. Her whole life was a mild protest, which those who lived under the same roof with her accepted smilingly and never thought of resenting.

"Who has been making a fool of himself now, Miss Skipwith?" inquired Archie.

Miss Skipwith, who had never had any great affection for this young man and thought him disposed to be impertinent, drew herself up, compressed her lips, and made no reply; but Mr. Bligh said: "Oh, you'll see presently, and I daresay you will agree with Susan. Nevertheless, I might have made an even greater fool of myself if I had refused to receive my only son. The most foolish thing that anybody can do is to put himself gratuitously in the wrong. Perhaps, if sufficient opportunity is given to him, Morton may do that, and then Susan will think better of me. Doesn't that strike you as a wise way of looking at things?"

Archie was fond of his uncle, because the latter

had always been kind to him and had been a good sportsman in bygone days; but he was not fond of irony, which he would probably have defined as a needless and irritating habit of saying what you didn't mean. "I don't know anything at all about it," he answered rather curtly.

At this moment the door opened and Cicely and her brother entered the room together. There was a strong family resemblance between them; but this resemblance, as the most careless observer must have noticed at a glance, was only skin deep. Morton Bligh had been a very handsome man, and was so still, despite his waxy, unhealthy complexion, and the grey threads in his dark hair. Like his sister he was small, well-proportioned, and had delicately moulded features; but his eyes and mouth differed greatly from hers, the former being narrow, glittering and too close together, while his lips were thin and had acquired an habitually smiling set which had no suggestion of mirth about it.

"I don't think you have ever met your cousin Archie before, Morton," said Mr. Bligh.

"Don't remember to have had that pleasure," answered the new comer, holding out a limp, white hand. "Been in India, haven't you? or somewhere. I forget whether you're a plunger or a gunner."

Archie explained good-humouredly that he was neither the one nor the other, and mentioned the distinguished corps to which he had the honour to belong.

"Oh, ah!—the 24th Lancers, of course," said the other. "Beg your pardon, I'm sure. I suppose a Lancer doesn't like being called a plunger, does he?"

"That entirely depends upon who calls him so," said Archie.

"Really? Well, I hope you mean that you don't mind my having called you so. The fact is that I know very little about soldiers; though I believe I was once in the Yeomanry myself. I joined the Yeomanry to please you, you know," he added, turning to his father.

"And retired to please yourself," observed Mr. Bligh.

"Exactly so. I'm too much given to pleasing myself; but it's never too late to mend, and I'm going to turn over a new leaf now. The fact of my being where I am at this moment is a pretty convincing proof of that."

"You don't flatter us," said Miss Skipwith, drily.

"My dear Aunt Susan, I'm incapable of it; I don't know how to flatter people, and it has been a great disadvantage to me through life. Besides, you would never have believed me if I had told you that I came here for the pleasure of seeing you all."

Mr. Bligh laughed a little at this, but the other three persons present remained grave and felt the announcement of dinner to be a relief. Morton, however, did not seem to consider a change of subject obligatory or desirable. While he was eating his soup he explained that much as he hated the country he had thought it best to familiarise himself with it, and with the management of a property which in the natural course of things must shortly be his. "One may not be enamoured of one's station in life," said he, "still as one can't escape from it, the only plan is to endeavour to fit oneself for it."

Cicely reddened with suppressed anger; Archie was greatly shocked and scandalised; and Miss Skipwith, in a high tremulous voice, began to talk about the danger that was sure to be done to the fruit-blossoms by the late frosts. But Mr. Bligh appeared to be much more tickled than annoyed at the calmness with which his approaching demise was counted upon. Morton was in many respects a queer, distorted reproduction of himself, and he recognised this with some inward amusement. He himself had always had a great love for truth, and a great contempt for the phrases in which it is customary to wrap up truth; only as he was courteous and kind-hearted, he could not have expressed himself as Morton did. That his son did not love him he was perfectly aware, and that his son should make no secret of the fact scarcely disturbed him. What, perhaps, he did not quite realise was that his son was a very clever fellow.

That was certainly not the opinion formed of him by Archie, who thought he had never met such a brute in his life. Archie, as has been said, was accustomed to look upon the Priory as his home, and had some right to do so, whereas Morton had not been near the place for many years. It was, therefore, not a little exasperating to the former to be treated by the latter as a guest. After Miss Skipwith and Cicely had left the dining-room, Morton (who was rapidly disposing of a decanter of port) urged him to have another glass of claret, begged him to smoke if he felt inclined, and apologized for the dulness of Abbotsport, where, he said, one really had no business to ask a man to stay at that season of the year. Mindful of the promise

that he had made, Archie kept his temper and responded civilly; but Morton's whole demeanour made his blood boil, and later in the evening he confided to Cicely that if that fellow meant staying, he was afraid he would have to go.

"I thought you would," remarked the girl, rather sadly; "I am not at all surprised at it."

"I won't go if you would rather I didn't," said Archie, brightening up a little.

"Well, I told you that I didn't want to have Morton left on my hands; and I told you that he would try to provoke you. Can't you manage to despise him?"

"Oh, yes, I think I can manage that much," replied the young man, with a short laugh.

"I mean can't you manage not to care what he says or does? My father isn't angry, you see; yet he has rather more reason to be angry, perhaps, than you have."

"I'll try to imitate him," answered Archie, sighing. "It isn't going to be easy, though, I can see."

He was young and peppery, while his uncle was old and philosophical, sick and weary. Moreover, his uncle, after all, was master of the house and of the situation, which made a difference. One may put up with a good deal of insolence and bad temper from a man whom it is in one's power to disinherit at any moment. Still, Archie was resolved to exercise self-control, and his resolution was put to a tolerably severe test when Morton and he had adjourned to the smoking-room.

"Cicely," observed Morton, after offering his cousin a cigar, "has grown up into a devilish good-looking

girl. I suppose one will have to find a husband for her soon."

"I should think she would choose for herself," said Archie shortly.

"Well, it will save trouble if she does—supposing she makes a reasonable choice, that is. But she strikes me as a rather unreasonable sort of young woman. Added to which, there's nobody for her to choose down here. A season in London might open her eyes a little."

"In what way?" inquired Archie.

"Oh, I don't say that it would make a reasonable being of her: there are so few reasonable beings about. But it would probably enlighten her as to her own market value, which is really a good bit above the average. You may depend upon it that the governor won't leave her a penny less than £30,000."

"Oh, that is her market value, is it?" said Archie. "Fortunately, she is not likely to offer herself for sale."

Morton screwed up his eyes and laughed unpleasantly. "You think she will marry for love, then?" said he.

"Yes, that is what I think, certainly."

"We must try to save her from making such an idiot of herself. Love is delightful; nobody has been more often in love than I have, and nobody appreciates the emotion more thoroughly. But then I have never made the mistake of imagining that it could last more than two years at the very outside. Marriage is another affair altogether; marriage is essentially a bargain, and women are very well aware of that."

"You speak as though all women were alike."

"So they are, my dear fellow. The popular belief is that there is a great gulf fixed between good and bad women; but that's nonsense. They differ in their talk, but they no more differ in their actions than men do."

"I should have said that men differed a good deal in their actions," observed Archie.

"That's only because circumstances vary; it isn't because human nature varies. It wouldn't occur to you to steal a leg of mutton; but you would a great deal rather steal a leg of mutton than be hungry. We're all tarred with the same brush; only it isn't supposed to be the proper thing to say so."

"I don't know how that may be," said Archie, "but I know that if I had a sister, I shouldn't like to talk about her as you do about yours."

"You wouldn't like to face facts, you mean; very few people do. Still it's the safest plan, upon the whole; and one unquestionable fact is that Cicely won't fall a prey to a fortune-hunter if her affectionate brother can prevent it."

To this Archie made no rejoinder; but throwing his cigar into the fire, got up and went to bed. It might be possible, he thought, to avoid quarrelling with Morton, but it was quite impossible to help wanting to break his neck.

CHAPTER IV.

MADAME SOURAVIEFF.

In the drawing-room of a small, but artistically furnished house in Clarges-street, a lady was seated, scribbling off notes and letters with a great appearance of haste. This was the Countess Souravieff, a name pretty well-known in all European capitals, except London, and now in a fair way to achieve notoriety there also. That the Countess would ever achieve anything more than that doubtful advantage was, perhaps, not very likely; because in these days political adventurers have to contend almost everywhere against democratic institutions, which limit the scope of their ingenuity. Still she was in some degree a personage. Diplomatists took her into account; Prime Ministers (one or two of them at all events) asked her to dinner and listened with interest to what she had to say; and the police kept a solemn and watchful eye upon her movements. This pleased her very much; for she was an ambitious woman, and what was more, she was quite in earnest. If there was one thing about which Madame Souravieff was more certain than another (and she was certain about a remarkable number of things) it was that the Slavonic races were destined to rule the world. That being so, the sooner the Slavonic races got into the saddle the better, and she was now devoting all her energies to giving them a leg up. With this end, and with certain subordinate and private ends of her own in view, she had taken a house in Mayfair for the

season, had initiated friendly relations with a few politicians and journalists, and explained to sundry great ladies that if she did not live with her husband, that was only because her husband was a man for whom it was impossible to feel anything but antipathy. She was not divorced from him; she was not even separated from him; but, since they could not meet without disagreeing, they had thought it advisable to meet as seldom as might be.

Judging by the quantity of invitation cards which lay upon her writing-table, the great ladies had considered these excuses sufficiently valid, and there was every prospect of Madame Souravieff's proving herself a social, if not a political, success. She had been a very pretty woman, and one would not have thought of employing the pluperfect tense in speaking of her had it not been for a few grey hairs in the neighbourhood of her temples and a slight inclination towards *embonpoint* in her figure. Her complexion and her teeth were as perfect as they had always been, and her large, dark eyes quite as expressive. One kind of critic might have objected that her cheek-bones were a little too high, and another kind that she had loaded her white fingers with rather too many jewels: in other respects there was really no fault to be found with her appearance.

Her epistolary labours were interrupted every now and then by the entrance of a grave butler, who brought her cards upon a silver tray. Some of them he merely handed to her and then retired; others appeared to call for some response, and this was always given in the same words—"I do not receive." It was not until the afternoon had become evening that this formula was

departed from in favour of a gentleman whose card bore the name "Mr. Mark Chetwode." The butler, who was an observant man, and naturally wanted to find out anything that he could about the foreign lady whose service he had only just entered, fancied that Madame Souravieff's hand trembled slightly as she took this scrap of pasteboard from him; but, however that may have been, there was no tremulousness in her clear voice when she said, "Yes, show him in."

He was shown in accordingly: a slim, pale man, very carefully dressed, who, despite his English name, had much more of the appearance of a Russian than the lady who rose to greet him. His age might have been anything between thirty and forty. His fair hair was cut close to his head, after the foreign fashion, and had no parting; his moustache was waxed; his eyes were of so pale a blue as to be almost colourless; his face (and this was what made many people admire him) had absolutely no expression whatsoever. One cannot help admiring a man who can manage to look a perfect blank without looking in the least a fool.

"What a pretty house!" he exclaimed, glancing appreciatively round the room. "You look quite as if you lived here. But that is a way of yours. If you were planted in the middle of Siberia—as perhaps you may be some fine day—you would make yourself completely at home in a few hours."

Madame Souravieff made a slight grimace. "Is that all you have to say to me?" she asked.

"Oh no; I have so many things to say that the difficulty is to know where to start. Perhaps I had

better begin by expressing my surprise and delight at meeting you in England."

"That would be as good a way of beginning as another, if it were not absurd. You are never surprised, Mark; and sometimes I think that you are never delighted. Of course I have very good reasons for being in England, and you know them all. For one thing, it is a free country."

"So they say; but to the best of my knowledge it is not a country in which one can do what one likes."

"At any rate it is a country in which one can say what one likes without being sent to prison."

"Yes—if that is an advantage. You will certainly obtain a good deal of sympathy, and possibly you may be able to collect a good deal of money, if you are careful to avoid specifying what you want it for. Setting politics aside, what motive have you for establishing yourself in Clarges-street?—if one may venture to ask."

"You ought not to require any answer to such a question," said Madame Souravieff.

Mr. Chetwode looked down at his neat little boots and tapped them meditatively with his cane for a few seconds. "It is dangerous," he said, at length. "One may be watched in London just as well as anywhere else."

"At least we can meet here, and we could not meet at Vienna or Wiesbaden. Besides, what do I care? Let him watch and spy to his heart's content. He can never find out anything wrong about me, because there is nothing wrong to find out."

"It might perhaps be sufficient if he found out that

I visited you constantly. I doubt whether he believes in my entire devotion to the cause of Panslavism."

"Nobody could believe easily in your devotion to any cause—or any person," returned Madame Souravieff, rather bitterly. "You almost make me regret that I did not take you at your word long ago and say farewell to you for ever. Most likely that is what you would have preferred. If you are weary of me, be honest and tell me so."

Mr. Chetwode raised his pale blue eyes and smiled faintly. "You know how long I have loved you, Olga," he replied. "I am not weary, I am only hopeless. And why should you compromise yourself by receiving me? It may get you into great trouble, and it can do no good to either of us. Do you know that when your note reached me I had serious thoughts of paying no attention to it? If I were a rich man the case would be different; but, as far as I can make out, I am very nearly a ruined man. I can do nothing either for you or for your cause, and, really, your wisest plan would be to show me the door."

Madame Souravieff seemed to be a good deal touched by the words, which were coldly enough enunciated. "Poor Mark!" she exclaimed compassionately. "Has your journey been a failure, then? Are your affairs in a worse state than you expected?"

"Oh, I expected them to be in a bad state. For some years past I have had very little to live upon beyond the rent that I received for my house, and now my tenant has departed, and the lawyer tells me that I am not very likely to find a fresh one. He thinks the

best thing I can do is to live there myself. It is a cheerful prospect."

"I can't imagine you living in an English province," remarked Madame Souravieff, smiling a little at the idea. "What will you do with yourself? Who will your neighbours be?"

"It is not unlikely that I shall blow my brains out. I have not had the curiosity to inquire who will be my neighbours. The village clergyman, I suppose, and the village doctor. Also a few native landowners—amongst others, the one who now owns the land which ought to be mine."

"I remember that you used to tell me about him. His name is Bligh, and he gained a lawsuit against you, because he was rich enough to bribe the judges. Was not that it?"

"Not exactly. In this country judges are irremovable, which, I am assured, renders them incorruptible. Nevertheless, a rich Englishman is more likely to win a lawsuit than a poor one, because he can go on applying to superior Courts. I believe it was in that way that Mr. Bligh obtained a decision against my father, whose means were limited."

"Consequently Mr. Bligh can hardly be counted as a neighbour."

"I do not precisely love him," replied Mr. Chetwode, with his slow, faint smile, "but if he sees fit to call upon me I shall return his visit. I hear, however, that he is a cripple; so he probably won't call upon me. Let us talk no more of my affairs, which are a most depressing topic of conversation. Tell me about yours. Has the date of the revolution been fixed yet?"

"What revolution?" inquired Madame Souravieff quickly.

"I am so stupid! I can't at this moment recollect whether it was to take place in Servia or Bulgaria. However, the Vienna people know all about it; so that the persons interested have no doubt received full warning."

"You accuse me of doing dangerous things," observed Madame Souravieff; "don't you think that you yourself sometimes say them? When one has taken such engagements as you have done, one should be a little less reckless."

"I am discretion itself in ordinary company; but with you I feel sure that I am safe. The revolution has my best wishes; only I am rather sceptical as to its coming off, because, as I tell you, the secret is already an open one."

"Mark," exclaimed Madame Souravieff, striking her hands together impatiently, "you are a true Englishman; you have no heart!"

"And everybody here tells me that I am not in the least like an Englishman. They say it regretfully and apologetically, because, of course, it is such a very cruel thing to say of any one; yet they think I ought to know it, in order that I may try to reform. As for my having no heart, that is a point upon which there can be no better judge than you. If you say that I have none, you are probably right."

Madame Souravieff made no rejoinder for some minutes. "And when do you propose to instal youself in this remote château of yours?" she asked abruptly, at length.

"I thought of going down to-morrow or the next day."

"Although you know that I came here for—for——"

"For political objects, as I understood."

"Ah, yes; for political objects. I had better stick to them, no doubt. Good-bye then, Mark, since you are so anxious to say good-bye." And she held out her hand to him.

"You are rather unjust, Olga," said Mr. Chetwode, without rising. "If I were anxious to leave London immediately after your arrival, and on account of it, that would be for your sake, not for mine. The Count can do me no sort of harm; it wouldn't injure me in any way if he were to learn that I was in this house from morning to night. But he might injure you very materially by the simple expedient of declining to pay your expenses any longer. You used to be fully alive to that risk."

"Do you mean to tell me that you are going away for my sake, then?"

"Oh, no—although if I were able to stay in London I should endeavour to be circumspect for your sake. I am going away for the vulgar but sufficient reason that I can't afford to live here. The necessaries of life are cheap at Abbotsport I am told."

Madame Souravieff looked as if she were strongly tempted to make an offer which it has been agreed from time immemorial that no man who respects himself can accept. Probably knowledge of her visitor's character restrained her from doing so; for she only sighed, and said: "Abbotsport? Is there an hotel at Abbotsport?"

"Certainly not. I doubt whether there is even an inn; though there may be a few ale-houses."

"Then I will tell you what I will do. When the London season is over, I will take your house. Will you let your house to me for a few months?"

"I shall be delighted; only in that case, you see, I should have to go away."

"Not necessarily. You could find accommodation in the neighbourhood, if you chose. Have you not an *intendant*—a bailiff—what do you call him? Turn him out of his house for the time; it could be easily done. We must think it over and devise some plan. It is absurd that we should both be in England, yet unable to exchange a word."

"I suppose it is," said Mr. Chetwode, rising; "yet, perhaps, it is even more absurd that we should continue to meet. As I told you before, I am useless and ruined. One should never compromise oneself for a ruined and useless man."

"You are not useless, and I have not compromised myself," declared Madame Souravieff, warmly. "As for ruin, nobody is ever ruined except by his own fault. I want you to be great and powerful, and I think you will be some day. And I want to see you from time to time, because—well, you know why. Try to believe, Mark, that one may be ambitious without being heartless, and that love is not always selfish."

"Dear me!" said Mr. Chetwode, "I thought that was just what I was proving. The unselfishness of love, I mean. I know very little about ambition."

To look at him, one would have imagined that he knew quite as much about that passion as about the

other; and, as a matter of fact, he was a man who had always coveted power and had fretted under conditions which had made the attainment of any sort of distinction impossible to him. Born and brought up at St. Petersburg, where his father, after marrying a Russian lady, had settled permanently, he belonged to his mother's nation in habits and feelings, while remaining an Englishman in name. Thus he had been debarred from any career either in the land of his adoption or that of his origin, and when his parents died he had passed the age at which a fresh start can be made. They left him a moderate fortune, which he got rid of slowly, but steadily, over the card tables at his club. He had amused himself to the best of his ability, but that was not very well, because, for his misfortune, amusements did not satisfy him. Of late years he had dabbled in political intrigues to an extent which had rendered his departure from St. Petersburg desirable, his chief reason for labouring in the cause of Panslavism being a desire to please Madame Souravieff, with whom he had fallen as much in love as a man of his temperament could. As he walked away from Clarges-street, with both his hands clasped behind his back, he said to himself that he was very tired of Panslavism and of the solemn mystery in which his fellow conspirators were wont to shroud their proceedings. Perhaps he was also beginning to be a little tired of Madame Souravieff; but this he did not say to himself, because there are misgivings which it is always unwise to formulate, lest they should thus resolve themselves into unmistakable realities. For two years past Madame Souravieff had been everything to him: if he were now

to lose the excitement by means of which she had been wont to make his somewhat sluggish blood run more quickly in his veins, he would have absolutely nothing left to live for. Life as an impoverished English country gentleman did not seem to him to offer any attractive possibilities; yet that was the kind of life which he had to face, and from which, so far as could be seen, no way of escape lay open to him. Thinking of this and of the forfeited income of certain lands, he forgot himself so far as to scandalise the crossing-sweeper in Berkeley Square by cursing the Bligh family aloud, root and branch.

CHAPTER V.

MARK'S LAWYER.

Mr. Chetwode walked away from Madame Souravieff's door with his eyes bent down gloomily upon the pavement, and his mind absorbed in meditation upon subjects with which his immediate surroundings for the time being had nothing to do. He therefore failed to notice a plump, middle-aged, smooth-shaven man of foreign aspect, who was loitering on the opposite side of the street, and who witnessed his exit with an amused smile. This individual's smile expressed relief as well as amusement; because he had been walking up and down Clarges-street for a long time, and few duties are so fatiguing as that of mounting guard. However, he was being handsomely paid for his work, which is always a consolation, and he was earning his pay by strict attention to duty, which is a greater con-

solation still to the scrupulous mind. He glanced at his watch, sighed comfortably, and murmured: "Enough for one day! Fifteen carriages, of which the greater part have coronets upon them; the society of London accepts Madame. No one is admitted until nearly six o'clock, when the suspected one presents himself. He enters, and emerges at the end of half an hour with the air of one who has wasted his time. But that is a detail which need not be mentioned in the report. If I am unable to watch the house continuously, that is due to no fault of mine but to the habits of these English, who are not *flâneurs*. One cannot walk two or three times up and down a London street without making oneself conspicuous; although on this occasion I have been fortunate enough to escape notice."

He had not been so fortunate in this respect as he supposed, for while he had been thus meditating and biting the end off a very long cigar, Madame Souravieff, who had moved to the window, had caught sight of him. "What insolence!" she exclaimed, and immediately rang the bell.

The grave butler, who presently appeared in answer to this summons, was surprised and somewhat scandalised by the order which he received. "On the other side of the street there is a fat man who is lighting a cigar. Run across and tell him to come here at once; I want to speak to him."

To suppose that a respectable English upper servant, who had lived in the very best families, would consent to "run" anywhere—and without his hat too—showed an ignorance of all propriety which could only be pardoned in a foreigner. The butler, of course, did no

such thing; but he despatched a subordinate, who overtook the stout stranger and duly delivered the message.

The stout stranger did not look disconcerted. He smiled, glanced regretfully at his cigar, then carefully cut the lighted end off it and replaced it in his pocket. "I am at the orders of Madame la Comtesse," said he, in very fair English.

And indeed nothing could have been more respectful than the bow with which he greeted Madame Souravieff, when that lady swept down into the dining-room, where he had been requested to wait for her, and fixed a pair of angry eyes upon him. "What does this mean, Victor?" she asked, in French.

The stout man shrugged his shoulders and spread out his hands. "Madame la Comtesse," he replied, "must be aware that I have no choice but to do my duty and obey the orders that are given to me."

"Is it the duty of a valet to be a spy?" Madame Souravieff enquired.

"*Mon Dieu,* Madame, we may say that it is the duty of every poor man to lay by a little money in anticipation of his old age. When Monsieur le Comte commands me to proceed to London for a certain purpose, and not only pays all my expenses but promises me three Napoleons as well, in addition to my ordinary wages, I find myself in the impossibility of refusing. The more so because I am persuaded that I might remain here for months without making any revelation of importance."

"You may certainly count upon that," returned Madame Souravieff, disdainfully. "At the same time it

is not agreeable to me to be watched, and I do not know why I should submit to such an insult."

"With permission, Madame la Comtesse, how can you help it? For the rest, one must admit Monsieur le Comte has reason to be disquieted. Monsieur desires to return to Russia as soon as his health may permit, and he is naturally anxious that he should not be coldly received at Court. It is said that Madame la Comtesse is pursuing a policy which is not that of His Majesty the Czar."

"Ah, bah! You were not sent here to report upon matters of policy, my good Victor. My political objects, of which I make no secret, are well known to Monsieur le Comte, and are, perhaps, less objectionable to His Majesty than is pretended. What is hoped for is that you may furnish evidence which will be instrumental in bringing about a divorce; but such evidence you never will be able to give, unless you perjure yourself. And you know that as well as anybody."

The valet replied that Madame la Comtesse was a thousand times right. Nevertheless, she would understand that he must make his report.

"No doubt. Report then all that you have seen and all that you have not seen. You may even give a report of this interview, if you choose. I have nothing to conceal."

The man smiled deferentially. "Am I to say that Mr. Chetwode was here this afternoon, and that he was the only person whom Madame deigned to admit?" he inquired.

"I have already told you that you are at liberty to report anything and everything, true or untrue."

"I only ventured to ask the question, because I feared that it might not be agreeable to Madame la Comtesse to be summoned back to Germany. Have I permission to mention Monsieur's instructions to me?"

Madame Souravieff nodded.

"He said—I beg pardon for repeating such words—he said, 'I will not be disgraced. If you find that she has gone to England in order to meet Mr. Chetwode you will let me know, and I will at once cease remitting money to her. Detestable'—I quote him textually—'detestable though her company is to me, I prefer even that to being made a laughing-stock.'"

Now Madame Souravieff did not mind being told that her company was detestable to her husband, because she knew that it was so, and had, indeed, always endeavoured to make it so; but she had no private fortune, and to be recalled from London to the German baths at which her husband was then sojourning would not have suited her at all. Therefore, without any superfluous delicacy, she drew her purse from her pocket and handed a couple of bank-notes to her interlocutor, to whom she observed briefly: "You have not seen Mr. Chetwode."

The valet took the notes and bowed profoundly. "I am convinced of it," said he. "There was a gentleman somewhat resembling Mr. Chetwode who entered the house a short time ago; but I could not be sure of recognising him, and now that Madame la Comtesse tells me that it was not he, all doubt is at an end. For the rest, Madame la Comtesse knows that I am, as ever, devoted to her interests. If I can be in any way useful——"

Madame Souravieff, who during this colloquy had been standing beside the dining-table, drummed upon it for a few seconds with her white fingers, while she looked over the man's head. "And Monsieur's health?" she asked abruptly, at length.

"Excellent, Madame. A little gout—a little indigestion—which are yielding to the action of the waters. Monsieur counts upon returning to St. Petersburg before the winter."

"Well," said Madame Souravieff, with an impatient sigh, "you can go now. I am sure that I may rely upon your fidelity, because it must be delightful to be paid both for saying things and for leaving them unsaid. Besides, you are now in my power. In the event of any unpleasantness arising, I should not hesitate for a moment to tell Monsieur that I had bribed you, and he would certainly believe me."

When Madame Souravieff was left alone, she began to laugh. She had a low, musical laugh, which was rightly considered to be one of her charms. "I was perhaps too quick," she murmured; "whatever Boris may have said, he is not likely to have said that. He would rather be despised than worried. Yet he is so malicious that he might be capable of putting up with my society if he knew how very much I should hate to leave England just now. After all, the best way is to pay Victor, and it is amusing to think that Boris provides the money." At this she laughed again; for she had a certain mischievous, childish sense of humour, which also was one of her charms.

However, she became grave and pensive while her maid was bedecking her for the dinner-party which she

had promised to attend, and at which she expected to meet some eminent politicians. She was a woman of the world, whose worldliness was tempered by a large admixture of enthusiasm and romance. Of human nature in the abstract she had formed a tolerably accurate estimate, having had sufficient opportunity of so doing; but it was not in her power to apply this estimate to individuals, and thus she was unfitted for success either in public or in private life. Loving Mark Chetwode as she did, with a perfectly disinterested love, she was obliged to clothe him in her thoughts with attributes which her reason told her that he did not possess; so that the memory of what he had said and done often gave her some anxious moments. Her temperament, however, was so far a fortunate and happy one, that if anything worried her she could almost always stop thinking about it; and she ceased to think about Mark very soon after she had seated herself in her carriage, and was being driven at a sharp trot towards Berkeley Square, where Lord Queensferry, with whom she had been invited to dine, resided.

Lord Queensferry was a man of over forty, who still looked young, and was always spoken of as being so. He was a Whig, and liked to be called a Radical; he was a sportsman, though scarcely a keen one; and he had made some smart speeches both in the House of Lords and upon the platform. Possibly he might never have risen to Cabinet rank if he had not been so very rich; but whatever the reason of it may have been, he had held high offices, and was sure to hold them again some day. At present he was in Opposition, which left him free to amuse himself and others

by delivering inflammatory harangues every now and then, by consorting with queer people, and by asking Madame Souravieff to dinner.

That lady, on being shown into the great drawing-room at Queensferry House, met with a very cordial reception from her host and hostess, and found herself in highly-distinguished company. The guests were not numerous, but they were celebrated, and Madame Souravieff had not been three minutes in the room before she perceived that she herself was, for the time being, the chief celebrity amongst them. They all looked at her, they were all anxious to be introduced to her, and it was evident that they all thought her a remarkably handsome woman. This pleased her immensely, for she loved admiration, and delighted in being recognised as a factor in contemporary politics. But she knew better than to begin talking of politics at once. While dinner was going on she contented herself with asking many questions about English life and manners, and confessing to a strong affection for English people.

"I should like to be an Englishwoman," she remarked ingenuously, during a pause in the general conversation; "but since that cannot be, I must try to be a good Russian. It is perhaps the next best thing."

Everybody thought her very nice and very clever, and in truth she managed to say some clever things in an unaffected way. She was, at all events, clever enough to know that English people are easily bored, and that nothing bores them quite so much as enthusiasm in private life. Therefore she kept a curb upon herself until her opportunity arrived.

This was soon after dinner, when the venerable statesman whose countenance and support she specially coveted approached her and seated himself upon the sofa by her side. He crossed his legs, folded his hands, smiled benignly and said: "Now, Madame Souravieff, you must tell me all about Bulgaria."

"Ah," she replied, "what can I tell you that you do not already know? You are one of those marvellous people who know everything."

The great man looked pleased, although he felt bound to disclaim the omniscience ascribed to him. When he was out of office he was compelled, he said, to derive his information from the newspapers, like the rest of the public, and such information was not always to be relied upon.

"Oh, the newspapers!" exclaimed Madame Souravieff, with a disdainful shrug of her shoulders. "I have always been accustomed to read the English newspapers, and since I have been in London I have done so with additional interest. They are very nicely printed—one must render them that justice—but I have often been obliged to rub my eyes in order to convince myself that the words which I seemed to see were actually there. The way in which they treat General Kaulbars, the most charming, the most inoffensive, the most placable man in the world, is enough to make anyone doubt their good faith. Yet I really believe that they are honest. The English people are no doubt stupid and easily taken in, but they are honest, and that is why I love them."

"We are certainly honest," said the statesman.

"Nevertheless you are, if I may be allowed to say

so, curiously prejudiced. Your one idea is that Russia wants Constantinople and must be kept out of it. You will not believe that Bulgaria is in the hands of a gang of adventurers, and that the heart of the people is—as indeed it must be—with us. You can't, or you won't, understand that it is we who have given freedom to Bulgaria, that the Bulgarians are our brothers by race and by creed, and that there is such a thing as gratitude even in politics."

"We may admit all that and yet not wish to see you at Constantinople, Madame Souravieff."

"But can you prevent us from going there eventually? Have you any alternative policy? I am only a woman, I have no pretensions to statecraft; still I can see that right is might, not might right. It is a conflict between Christianity and infidelity, and though Europe may choose to take the losing side and to close her eyes, and may retard the inevitable for many years to come, yet at last Christianity must conquer, as it always has conquered. The Cross will be raised again upon the dome of St. Sophia—I am as certain of it as I am of my own existence—the only question is whether this shall be done with or against the will of Christendom."

She spoke with a great deal of animation, and perhaps her beauty and her earnestness may have impressed her auditor, who remarked, "I, at least, shall hardly be accused of entertaining any sentiments of tenderness for the Turks."

"Nor for us either, I am afraid. Ah, if you only understood us and would trust us! There are but two great races in the world, the Anglo-Saxon and the

Slav. Let them be friends, instead of enemies, and the peace and happiness of mankind is assured! Is it too much to hope for such an understanding?"

Whether this was or was not an extravagantly sanguine expectation, she was encouraged to enlarge upon it, and the succeeding half hour was made extremely pleasant to her. By the end of that time the room was full of people, for Lady Queensferry was holding a great reception, to which she had invited every man and woman whose name appeared in her visiting-book. Amongst them were many persons who wished to be recognised by Madame Souravieff's interlocutor, and amongst them, too, was a certain obscure (comparatively obscure) solicitor who, for reasons of his own, was anxious to make Madame Souravieff's acquaintance.

He attained his object without any difficulty, and she smiled with her usual graciousness when the little chubby, grey-headed man, who was introduced to her as "Mr. Wingfield," drew his heels together and made her a profound bow, though she wondered who Mr. Wingfield might be and what he could have to say to her.

He had plenty to say to her about political matters, and was much less reserved than the great statesman had been. He quite saw the force of all her arguments; he professed himself a Liberal—a moderate Liberal—and was willing to allow that the British public might have been wholly misled as to the state of affairs in the Balkan provinces. But of course she understood perfectly well that he only reached his point when he remarked casually, "A great friend and

client of mine, who, I believe, is also a friend of yours, is deeply interested in the Eastern Question. I mean poor young Chetwode."

"Why do you call him poor?" Madame Souravieff inquired.

"Because, unfortunately, he is very poor indeed. He seems to have spent nearly the whole of his fortune —whether in support of revolutionary committees or not, of course, I can't say—and the income arising from the small extent of property which still remains to him in this country can hardly do more than keep the big house which stands upon it in repair."

"He was defrauded of a part of his property by a neighbour of his, was he not?" asked Madame Souravieff.

The lawyer laughed.

"Oh, well, his father used to say so, and I believe he himself has some such idea. As a matter of fact, old Mr. Bligh, the father of Mark's present neighbour, held mortgages and foreclosed. Old Mr. Bligh may not have been very friendly or forbearing; but he was certainly within his right. However, the transfer of the land has left a great deal of bitter feeling, which is to be regretted. In your wide experience you must have met with many queer types of humanity, Madame Souravieff; did you ever happen to come across a romantic lawyer before?"

"Frequently," answered Madame Souravieff, smiling. "Why not?"

"Well, perhaps they are more common in Russia than they are in England. Anyhow, I have always regarded myself as singular in that respect. It is an

amiable weakness which I can't help, and which, after all, harms nobody. Lately I have been beguiling my leisure moments by constructing a romantic plot, of which Mark Chetwode is the hero and Mr. Bligh's only daughter the heroine. I must tell you that Mr. Bligh is a very rich man, and that his daughter will certainly inherit a considerable fortune from him, if she does not inherit the whole of his landed property."

"Is she pretty?" asked Madame Souravieff, quickly.

"I believe she is not plain," said the astute solicitor; "but one must not be too exacting in such cases."

He looked sharply, as he spoke, at the Russian lady, who preserved an unruffled exterior. "I hope," said she musingly, "that your romance may become a reality. It would be a very good thing."

"Yes, yes," returned Mr. Wingfield, nodding his head; "it would be a good thing. A good thing for Mark, and, perhaps, not a very bad thing for the revolutionary committees."

"Oh, I know nothing about revolutionary committees," Madame Souravieff declared; "it is only from the newspapers that I hear of their existence. Still, there is no cause in the world that can be kept going without funds, and you are quite right in guessing that Mr. Chetwode will be more valuable to us as a rich man than as an impoverished one."

She turned away with a little nod of dismissal, leaving Mr. Wingfield in some doubt as to whether she would prove to be an ally or an opponent of his. "But I am pretty sure of one thing," he reflected; "I am pretty sure that Mark wants to be rid of her."

CHAPTER VI.

ARCHIE GOES OUT FISHING.

"LOWNDES brought me a bit of news this morning," remarked Mr. Bligh, addressing the four persons who were seated at luncheon round the oval table.

"I know what it is," exclaimed Miss Skipwith excitedly; "I have been expecting it for weeks past. The Bishop has forbidden him to use the eastward position, and I must say that I think the Bishop is perfectly right. I do hope Mr. Lowndes will not be so silly as to go on defying the law."

"Oh, I fancy he will," answered her brother-in-law, placidly. "The Bishop hasn't been so silly—or so wise, which is it?—as you imagine. Lowndes's news was of a less important kind. It is only that young Mark Chetwode is coming home."

"Coming to live at Upton Chetwode, do you mean?" asked Cicely eagerly. "I call that very important indeed. Is he really going to settle there, or is he only coming down until he can find another tenant?"

"That Lowndes didn't know," answered Mr. Bligh. "Probably Chetwode would be glad to let the place again if he could; but it isn't very letable, and he can't afford to leave it empty. The chances are that he will have to occupy it himself for a good many years to come."

"Poor devil!" ejaculated Morton, compassionately.

"You wouldn't like to be situated as he is, would you?" asked his father, with a smile.

The heir-apparent took some trouble to make his

meaning clear. Certainly he would not care to be in Mark Chetwode's shoes, because, in his opinion, nothing could be more wretched than to live in a large house surrounded by lands which had passed away from one's family, and to be reminded at every turn that one represented a worn-out, poverty-stricken race. He did not in the least believe that the day of territorial influence and usefulness had gone by; only landowners who depended for an income on their land were now an anachronism. They couldn't live upon such an income, much less help others out of it. "Look at this property, for instance," he added. "It is a well-managed property, I believe; but if it were mine I would much rather sell it at once than attempt to keep things going upon the rents that I could squeeze out of my tenants."

"I trust that you will never be reduced to so painful a necessity," said Mr. Bligh, with such a slight twinkle in his eyes that nobody noticed it.

"I remember that I used to hear vague rumours about the Chetwodes when I was a boy," remarked Archie. "The Abbotsport people shook their heads over them, and doubted whether they weren't traitors to their Queen and country. Didn't they stay in Russia all through the Crimean War?"

"I believe so," answered Mr. Bligh; "but as Mark was not born at that time we must not hold him responsible. I daresay you recollect old Mr. and Mrs. Morant, who lived at Upton Chetwode for many years. They are both dead now, and I suppose it isn't easy to find anybody who would care to take such a large house, with nothing attached to it beyond the park and a few acres of woodland."

"There are pheasants in the woods," said Cicely, "and there might be many more at the cost of a little money and trouble. Upton Chetwode is a dear old place, which must not be allowed to fall into ruins. I shall seize the first opportunity of telling Mr. Chetwode that it is his duty to take up his abode there."

"You have such a convincing way of putting things, my dear," observed her father, "that I am quite sure he would see his duty at once, if only a chance of pointing it out to him were given you. Unfortunately, there is very little prospect of your getting that chance, because I am afraid he has been taught to regard us as hereditary enemies."

"Oh, but he must not be so ridiculous," Cicely declared, decisively. "Old Mr. Wingfield told me all about that when he was down here last year, and he himself said that it was perfect nonsense. The Chetwodes couldn't have kept their property in any case; and they ought to be thankful that it wasn't grabbed by some horrid old Jew or other. Besides, if ever he has money enough to buy it back I am sure we shall be delighted to let him have it."

"Shall we, indeed?" said Mr. Bligh, laughing. "I was not aware of that; but since you say so no doubt it is so."

Morton glanced at his sister from beneath his lowered eyelids, and remarked: "Little girls shouldn't be so cock-sure of other people's intentions."

This brought about an uncomfortable period of silence, soon after which the company dispersed. Mr. Bligh was wheeled away to the library; Miss Skipwith, murmuring something about having letters to write,

fluttered after him towards the sitting-room which was appropriated to her especial use; and Morton, with a cigar in his mouth and his hands in his pockets, made for the smoking-room.

"How long," asked Archie, when he was left alone with his cousin, "do you suppose that your dear brother means to stay here?"

She shook her head rather despondently. "I think he is very tired of us," she replied, "but then, unhappily, we have not been able to conceal our desire for his departure. Perhaps if we all went down on our knees and implored him to remain with us he might fly."

Archie did not seem disposed to treat the matter in so light a spirit. "The man is simply intolerable!" he declared. "I have put up with him for three days, and in spite of great provocation I have behaved to him, I really must say, like an angel—for your sake."

"Thank you," said Cecily, with a little bow.

"Well, you asked me to be civil to him, you know. But I don't think I can stand his perpetual impertinence to you much longer."

"If I can stand it I should think you might. I really don't mind what you call his impertinence; the only thing that distresses me is that I am afraid his being in the house worries my father. However it can't be helped, and there's no use in talking about it. What are you going to do this afternoon? Would you like to be taken out fishing with me and Bobby Dare? Bobby wrote to me this morning to say that he had hired a boat of old Coppard (who, by-the-way, must have borrowed it, for he hasn't one of his own), and it would be an act of charity if we were to make use of it."

"Of charity to Dare or to Mr. Coppard?" inquired Archie.

"Well, to both, perhaps," answered the girl, laughing. "Besides, it might help to amuse you—which is more to the purpose."

Archie was not quite sure that it would amuse him to put out to sea; because the wind was in the east, and, as everybody knows, the wind cannot blow from that quarter in the English Channel, be it never so softly, without raising a long swell, which is apt to be disconcerting to landsmen. But he was not going to miss the chance of spending several hours in Cicely's society; still less was he inclined to leave her for several hours in the society of Bobby Dare.

Presently, therefore, the two young people set forth for the village, and Morton, who espied them from the smoking-room window, muttered: "Hang the fellow! he ought to be ashamed of himself. If he had the feelings of a gentleman he would understand that he has no alternative but to clear out and not show his face here again until a certain event has taken place. He may come back then, and welcome."

But Archie was free from any of the scruples which, according to this rigid moralist, ought to have disturbed him, because—incredible though that would have seemed to the rigid moralist—he was free from any suspicion of their appropriateness. He adored Cicely, and that was all that he thought about in connection with her. He did not believe his uncle to be dying; he had never asked himself what would happen when his uncle died, or supposed that it was in contemplation to put him in Morton's place. All his life he had had a

sufficiency of money, and the idea of being wealthy would not have been especially attractive to him, even if it had entered his head. What chiefly preoccupied him just now was an uneasy feeling of jealousy of Bobby Dare, which, as almost anybody could have told him, was a perfectly absurd sentiment to harbour. It was well known in the neighbourhood of Abbotsport that Miss Bligh held her head very high indeed, and that there was little likelihood of her throwing herself away upon the younger son of a baronet whose rent roll, probably, did not exceed £4,000 a year. But the Abbotsport estimate of Miss Bligh was unknown to Archie; nor, perhaps, had it been revealed to him, would he have recognised its accuracy.

"What short of a chap has Dare developed into?" he asked her, while they were walking at a brisk pace across the park; and when she replied carelessly, "Oh, rather a nice, manly boy," he felt reassured. He himself had not yet passed the age of those—*fortunatos nimium*—who can't hear themselves described as boys without considering that they have been insulted; so he was quite prepared to extend the hand of tolerant good-fellowship to his old acquaintance, Lieutenant Dare, R. N., who had been walking impatiently up and down the jetty for a good half-hour before the arrival of Cicely and her escort.

Bobby Dare, for his part, was not precisely overjoyed to see the young Lancer, for whose appearance he had not been prepared; but as he was a thoroughly kind-hearted and good-natured little fellow, he said everything that was polite, and was even considerate enough to mention that there was a bit of a lop outside.

"I know Miss Bligh doesn't care," he said, "she's as good a sailor as I am. But there are a good many people who cannot stand an easterly swell."

Archie at once gave it to be understood that he was not one of the unfortunates alluded to; and from the bottom of his heart he hoped he was not. At all events, he would have died rather than retreat at the eleventh hour, and he seated himself in the boat with a grim determination that if by any means the mind could be made to dominate the body he would not disgrace himself.

Now there is no doubt but that the mind can dominate the body to a certain extent and within certain limits. Any ordinary person, by putting forth the full strength of his will, may keep himself for a time from fainting or from being sea-sick; but even an extraordinary person is bound to be vanquished at length. In the former case the colours have to be hauled down when everything becomes black; in the latter defeat is indicated by symptoms upon which it is needless to dwell. Archie was well acquainted with them, and was thankful that he did not experience them during the first half-hour that he spent on board the *Rover*. Nevertheless, he was not altogether happy. There was very little wind, but the ebbing tide was raising a nasty cross sea, over which the boat plunged and rolled uncomfortably; he was afraid that he was looking rather green, and he felt incapable of keeping up conversation. Over the side he was dangling a line with which old Coppard had provided him; although nobody knew better than old Coppard that there was not the remotest prospect of any fish being caught under existing

circumstances. But after all, fishing of that kind is never a very exciting form of sport, and in truth neither Bobby Dare nor Cicely cared a straw whether they were successful or not. Cicely was enjoying herself. She loved the sea; perhaps, too, she did not dislike the humble worship of her neighbour, who, with the tiller under his arm, was looking unspeakable things at her. She ignored the unspeakable things, but listened willingly to those which were spoken, and displayed a kindly interest in what Bobby told her about his prospects. He had been through a course of gunnery instruction; he hoped soon to be afloat again; he confessed that he did not care much about a prolonged leave, and said, with something of a sigh, that his profession was all he had to live for. His wooing could hardly be called a wooing, because it started with the assumption that there was no hope for him (which is a very fatal assumption to start with); yet he obtained a measure of compassion and gratitude which his rival noted with vexation. It was not pleasant to hear Cicely saying that if she had been a man she would certainly have been a sailor; it was still less pleasant to catch fragments of confidential communications about her brother, which she thought fit to make to one who was in no way concerned with her family affairs; and what was worst of all was to be treated as non-existent. Archie was not accustomed to be so treated; he did not appreciate the delicacy which deterred his cousin from looking at him or addressing him; and so, as time went on, his physical uneasiness became complicated by a sharp attack of jealousy and ill-temper.

Meanwhile, Coppard, who had been sitting in the

bows, with his elbows on his knees, and had been keeping very quiet (for he was not sure whether Miss Cicely had forgiven him yet) was also growing uneasy. Coppard knew that the wind was shifting—had, indeed, already shifted a point or two to the southward. Furthermore, he knew that it was going to blow, and had private misgivings which he felt bound at last to express.

"What should you say to gettin' about, sir?" he asked, deferentially. "'Tis working up rather ugly to the west'ard, and we may get more of it than we want presently."

Bobby rose and took a quick survey of the horizon. "Yes, there's a change of weather coming," he agreed, "but I expect we shall be all right until after sunset. What do you think, Miss Bligh? Do you want to go back?"

Cicely did not want to go back, but she did think that the sky looked threatening. After a momentary hesitation, she referred the question to her cousin. "Have you had enough of it, Archie?"

Thereupon Mr. Coppard was ill-advised and ill-mannered enough, to chuckle. "More'n enough, miss, you may depend!" answered he, before Archie could open his lips. Then it was that Archie was impelled to declare promptly and mendaciously that for his part he didn't care if they stayed out till midnight. Now this, little as he supposed it, was by no means an impossible contingency. The south-west wind defied precedent, as it sometimes will, by rising, first in puffs, then with steadily increasing force, a good hour before its proper time, and soon the *Rover* was running before

it towards Abbotsport without any certainty of being able to make that haven. The harbour, it is true, was protected by a breakwater, which Mr. Bligh had caused to be constructed, but then this breakwater had for years past been causing the gradual formation of a bar, and under certain conditions of tide and wind this bar was an obstacle which had to be taken into account."

"I doubt we shan't do it, sir," said Coppard to the man at the helm.

"Oh, we shall do it right enough," returned the latter, who had himself been peering somewhat anxiously across the curling waves ahead; "there ought to be plenty of water."

"So there did, sir; you never spoke a truer word. But maybe there ain't, you see. 'Tis nigh upon low water now, and the sea setting straight in."

"Well, but what are we to do if we can't cross the bar, Coppard?" Cicely inquired.

Coppard had to confess that in that case there would be nothing for it but to stand out to sea again and await the turn of the tide. This, he hastened to add, would involve no sort of risk; the *Rover* would make nothing of far worse weather than they were likely to see that evening. Only, to be sure, they might get a wetting.

"Hang it all, man!" exclaimed Archie, with a sudden outburst of irritation, "if you knew there was going to be any difficulty about getting into harbour, why did you keep us out so long? I suppose the fact is that you're paid by time."

He might have brought many more injurious ac-

cusations without giving half so much offence. The only excuse for him was that he was afraid neither Cicely nor Bobby would much mind being exposed to the buffetting of the waves for another two or three hours, whereas he knew for certain that he himself must very shortly collapse.

Coppard behaved extremely well. For a moment he scowled angrily at the young man, but he controlled himself and only answered: "I'll take 'ee in, sir, if so be as it can be done. I don't want Miss Cicely to be put to no inconvenience."

So they kept on their course, while a little group of persons who were watching them from the jetty hoped that they might be in time, but had doubts about it.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE ALIEN.

"YOUR view, then," said Mark Chetwode, "is that I must grin and bear it?"

He was sitting in the City office of Mr. Wingfield whither he had betaken himself in order to consult his family solicitor about certain matters of business, the discussion of which had gradually led to a topic very near his heart—that, namely, of the transfer of a part of his hereditary possessions to Mr. Bligh.

"My dear sir," answered the little lawyer, folding his hands and smiling amiably, "what other view could a sensible being take? Nobody asks you to grin, but as for bearing it—well, I suppose we must all bear what can't be helped. Your poor father, I know, per-

sisted in thinking that he had been defrauded, but that, if I may be allowed to say so, was very great nonsense. He mortgaged his land, he was unable for a considerable time to pay the interest due, and then the mortgagee foreclosed. You may be as angry as you please with the mortgagee, but I really don't see how you can imagine that you have any legal claim against him. For the matter of that I confess that I don't see much sense in being angry with him either."

Mark Chetwode stroked his moustache and fixed his colourless eyes upon Mr. Wingfield. "I am very seldom angry," said he; "only I should have thought that in this country, where justice is supposed to reign supreme, a man would have been allowed some chance of redeeming his own. My father, as you know, could have done that, if time had been given him."

"Your theory," observed the lawyer, with a smile, "favours an insecurity of title which would hardly be to the public advantage. Not that it matters much. Your father, you say, could have freed the estate; but could you do so?"

"No, because I have been a fool, and have squandered my patrimony. That, however, does not prevent me from regarding Mr. Bligh as a licensed robber. I am unreasonable, if you choose, but that is how I feel."

"Well now," said the lawyer, persuasively, "I wouldn't feel in that way about it if I were you; I wouldn't really. It's a little bit absurd, you know, and I am sure that you are no lover of absurdity. You have a fancy—a very natural and very creditable fancy—for recovering the land which once belonged to your family. But

there are more ways than one of doing that. Or, to be strictly accurate, there is only one way; and I should think that it would be by no means an unpleasant one. Mr. Bligh, who won't live much longer, has a daughter; and from all that I hear his daughter has an excellent chance of being his heiress."

"He has a son, too, hasn't he?"

"Yes, but his son is a black sheep. Not an ordinary black sheep, who might be expected to turn more or less white on acquiring wealth and responsibility, but one of a deep and permanent dye. Morton Bligh has advertised himself, too, as a radical. Also he is a free-thinker, who has translated the freedom of his thoughts into action after a fashion which shows that he has the courage of his opinions. There is no saying what mischief a fellow like that might not work in such a place as Abbotsport, where feudal traditions still linger. His father, who is a conscientious Tory, is afraid of his son and would like to disinherit him. He is not fond of his son and he adores his daughter. His present scheme, if I am correctly informed, is to disinherit the son in favour of the daughter, always supposing he can get the daughter to marry a nephew of his, a subaltern in a cavalry regiment. But the young lady is said to be self-willed; and for my own part I should imagine that a young lady's first cousin would always start rather heavily handicapped."

"Oh, I see. You would advise me to enter myself against the subaltern?"

"Why not? It would be an honourable and satisfactory method of attaining your object."

Mark Chetwode laughed. He had a singularly dreary laugh.

"I am much obliged to you," he said, "but there are reasons which I am afraid would make it impossible for me to adopt your suggestion."

Mr. Wingfield knew a great deal better than to inquire what those reasons might be. He only remarked, after a pause, during which he had glanced at some of the letters which where lying upon his table: "By-the-way, I met your friend, Madame Souravieff, at Lord Queensferry's the other night. Lord Queensferry, who is a client of mine, asks me to his big crushes, and in that way I get occasional glimpses of celebrities. Madame Souravieff is a celebrity, isn't she? Anyhow she is a very clever woman."

"Did you think so?" returned Mark, languidly. "What did she talk about to you?"

"Oh, not much about politics; she probably understood that my political opinions were of no great importance to anybody. I think we talked more about you than about anything else. And she quite agreed with me that you could not do better than marry Miss Bligh." Mr. Wingfield, as he made this assertion, peeped from under his eyelids at his visitor, whose impassive countenance did not change. The lawyer, however, was a close observer, and he thought that he detected an almost imperceptible movement, which could not be called a start yet might be taken as an equivalent to one, on the part of the younger man.

Mark said, "That was generous of her, because she doesn't as a rule like her friends to marry."

The subject was not pursued further, and soon

afterwards he took his leave. He walked meditatively for some distance down the street, and the upshot of his meditations was that he said to himself, "I don't believe it." As a matter of fact he seldom believed in anybody or anything, experience having convinced him that most things and people are false. Still it seemed worth while to proceed to Clarges-street with a view to making investigations; so he hailed a hansom and had himself driven to Madame Souravieff's door.

That lady was at home and was glad to see him, or at all events professed to be so.

"I didn't expect you to-day," she said; "you told me you wouldn't be able to come."

"I didn't think I should be able to come," he said; "I had to go and hold a conference with my old solicitor, Mr. Wingfield, and I imagined that he would detain me longer than he did. As it happened, our conference was brief and unsatisfactory. He assured me that I had nothing at all to complain about, that the property which was once ours now belonged quite legitimately to Mr. Bligh, and that if I wanted to get it back again I had better begin paying my addresses to Mr. Bligh's daughter, who, it seems, is not unlikely to be his successor before long."

Madame Souravieff nodded. "Yes, that is what he said to me," she observed. "Did he tell you that we had met at Lord Queenferry's?"

"He did, and he added that you approved of this scheme. I had just a shade of difficulty in believing him."

A very slow and faint flush overspread Madame Souravieff's cheeks. She looked down at the carpet,

which she was tapping softly with her foot. Her feet were small and well shaped, and her shoes always fitted perfectly.

"Do you consider me a selfish woman?" she asked, raising her eyes suddenly.

"I do not pretend to understand women," Mark replied. "All I am sure about in dealing with them is that one can never be sure of them."

It was not a very polite speech, but it did not seem to displease Madame Souravieft, who smiled. "Actually a little suspicion of jealousy?" she asked, with lifted eyebrows.

"At the risk of seeming unpardonably vain, I must own that I did not think you would wish me to marry."

He looked piqued, and the truth was that he felt so, although he was more than half conscious of longing for a release which only Madame Souravieff could give him.

How far she read his thought is uncertain, for the benefit of a doubt is what no human being has ever been able to refuse to him or herself. But she said gently,

"I think you are right; I think you don't understand women. When we love, we love less selfishly than you do. We are wise or foolish; it doesn't matter, because we can't help ourselves; we are made like that. I want you to be happy, I want you to be rich, and I know you well enough to know that you can never be happy unless you are rich." She added with a deep sigh, "And the Count will live for ever. He will always

have the gout; but that will not prevent him from hobbling after my coffin when I am laid in my grave. He will make a point of being at the ceremony; he is a great stickler for etiquette, as you know."

Mark shrugged his shoulders. "You really desire then that I should raise another barrier between us?"

"My friend, when we have already a stone wall between us which we cannot climb, it signifies very little whether you erect a second one beyond it or not. If there were any hope—but there is no hope! Marry your heiress; it is not I who shall forbid you. Only," she added, with an abrupt laugh, which had a certain ring of fierceness in it, "do not permit yourself to fall in love with her."

"I possess guarantees against that danger," said Mark.

He remained another half-hour with the woman whom he had once adored, and whom, perhaps, he still loved. She had many qualities which were easily enough understood, but she had others which were incomprehensible save to enthusiasts, and there never lived a less enthusiastic man than Mark Chetwode.

When they parted it was with the mutual knowledge that they would meet no more for some time to come. He was going to his long-deserted home, and she was compelled, or thought herself compelled, to remain in London. But they were to write to one another frequently, and when the season should be more advanced, perhaps she might carry out that plan of renting his house from him.

"In the meantime," were her last words, "try to make yourself very agreeable to the heiress. You can

be very agreeable when you please; one must do you that justice."

"I suppose," said Mark, as he walked away, "that she is really unselfish. It is strange; but it seems to be the truth. After all, she has common sense on her side. It is time to conclude a romance which has no prospect of reaching any reasonable conclusion. Perhaps that is what she means, though she doesn't like to say it in so many words."

As to Mr. Wingfield's project, in which she had acquiesced with such surprising readiness, he did not trouble himself to consider it seriously. He was not a vain man; he did not suppose—as they apparently did—that the heiress would be quite pleased to marry him if he did her the honour to propose to her; moreover, such a method of regaining the possessions of his forefathers would have been repugnant to him. Not that he had any sort of scruple about making a marriage of convenience, but he had been brought up to regard the Bligh as his enemies; he had been accustomed to hold them as in some undefined way responsible for the many failures of his life, and for his present impecunious condition. He hated the very sound of their name, and was convinced that he should hate them individually if ever he were brought into contact with them.

On the following day he reached Upton Chetwode, and saw for the first time the beautiful old house of which the exterior had been made familiar to him by photographs. It was undeniably a beautiful old house, dating almost throughout from the sixteenth century, standing (as beautiful old houses so seldom do) upon a

height, surrounded by lawns and flower-beds, beyond which an expanse of fairly well-timbered park fell gradually away to the edge of the chalk cliffs. But it was scarcely an inviting or cheerful dwelling-place for a lonely man. The lawns were unmown; the flower-beds were bare; the gravel walks evidently had not been weeded for a very long time; the few rooms which had been opened for the reception of the owner were dark, gloomy, deserted-looking, and had a damp, musty smell. As Mark stood gazing out of one of the mullioned windows at his shrunken territory and at the prospect of grey sea and sky which was discernible in the waning light of a chill spring evening, he shuddered and murmured under his breath, "A garret in Paris would be better than this."

Dinner was served for him presently in the great silent dining-room, and a very bad dinner it was. He had engaged no servants; the old couple who, with their daughter, had been living in the house since the departure of the last tenant, would, he presumed, be capable of providing for his modest wants. His French valet waited upon him, and enlivened the proceedings from time to time by a heartrending sigh. All this was bad enough, but going to bed was a great deal worse. It was a positive fact—for he ascertained it by inquiry—that there was not a single spring mattress in the whole house; so that there was nothing for it but to sleep, or attempt to sleep, upon a feather bed. And they had put him into the best bedroom, which was oak-panelled and of gigantic dimensions, and the bedstead itself was an appalling old four-poster. "Same as pore Mr. Morant died in," the old woman who had

cooked the dinner informed him, by way of a recommendation.

Perhaps it was because he had spent such an extremely wretched night that the forlorn owner of Upton Chetwode was able to take a slightly more cheerful view of his demesne on the following morning. When one's spirits have reached the lowest attainable ebb, they must needs begin to flow again; besides, sunshine makes a difference in everything and everybody. He did not in the least believe that he could reside permanently in such a place, but he thought he might be able to put up with it for a time, and that by laying out a little money upon it (though where the money was to come from he couldn't imagine) he might render it attractive enough to tempt a tenant of retiring tastes; and he felt a certain languid curiosity to make acquaintance with the details of English country life. It would at least be a new experience, if not a particularly exciting one. So he roamed over the house and the gardens, and had interviews with the few dependents whose services he had been compelled to retain, and he gave an order or two, and wrote some letters and listened to a great many complaints, the nature of which he scarcely understood, and thus the day passed away more quickly than might have been anticipated. It was already evening when he set out to walk seawards, thinking that perhaps he would pursue his explorations as far as the village of Abbotsport, which, he had been given to understand, might be reached by a zig-zag pathway cut in the face of the cliff.

Now it came to pass that while he was wandering along the confines of his domain in search of this path

he encountered a little old lady who was hurrying from another point of the compass towards the same destination, and who appeared to be much perturbed by the sight of him. She started, threw up her hands nervously and faltered out, "Oh, I'm afraid I'm trespassing."

Mark took off his hat. "You are very welcome, Madam," he replied, smiling.

In acknowledgement of this civility, the old lady made an antiquated bow, which was almost a curtsey. "I think," she said, "you must be Mr. Chetwode." And when he had admitted his identity she added, "We did not know that you were expected here so soon; otherwise, I should not have ventured to take this liberty. The truth is that I have been calling at the Rectory, and was on my way to the village. This is a short cut which poor Mr. Morant kindly gave us permission to use."

"You will confer a favour on me if you will continue to use it," Mark declared. "This neighbourhood does not appear to be densely populated, and I presume that the permission was not given to an unlimited number of persons."

"Oh, dear, no!" returned the old lady, looking a little shocked at such an idea. "We ourselves very seldom took advantage of it. This afternoon I was rather in a hurry to get to Abbotsport, because I was anxious about my niece, who has gone out sailing. The wind, you see, has changed, and Mr. Lowndes says we may expect a gale; and sometimes it is impossible for boats to enter the harbour. Oh, dear, what a pity it is that young people will be so careless and thoughtless!"

"I don't think we are going to have a gale," said

Mark, to comfort her, though in truth he was no judge of such matters. "But I can quite understand your anxiety. I myself am bound for the village; perhaps you will kindly permit me to accompany you, and will show me the way."

Miss Skipwith thought him a very pleasant-mannered young man, and assented graciously; but when she told him who she was, a change came over his face which she could not help noticing.

"Oh," she exclaimed breathlessly, "perhaps I ought to have mentioned my name before. I am afraid—but really that is a great mistake—that you think Mr. Bligh has taken your property from you?"

"I may be mistaken, but I was certainly under the impression that the property had passed into Mr. Bligh's hands," said Mark, with a rather grim smile.

"Yes, but then, you know, it was paid for; and besides, it was not Wilfrid but his father who foreclosed—if that is the right word to use. It does seem so sad and so unnecessary that there should be any bad feeling about it. Only the other day Cicely was saying that they would be delighted to let you buy the land back if you wished. Of course it isn't in her hands yet, and perhaps never will be, but I am sure that neither she nor her father would ever be guilty of an unneighbourly action."

"Is Cicely your niece?" asked Mark, who was amused and a little touched by the communicativeness of the elderly stranger.

"Yes, and the dearest and best girl in the world, though a little too fond of her own way. But that is only what might have been expected. Poor Wilfrid

being so ill and suffering, and that dreadful son of his always absent, a great deal has devolved upon Cicely which other girls of her age would naturally have been spared. Just now I am in a good deal of trouble and perplexity about her. But I must really apologise for speaking to you about family affairs, which of course can't interest you."

"They would interest me very much indeed if you would tell me about them," answered Mark, smothering an inclination to laugh. "Please go on."

CHAPTER VIII.

CICELY IS INTERESTED.

Everybody who knew Miss Skipwith at all well agreed that she was a goose; and the general verdict was probably correct. Nevertheless, geese sometimes accomplish what wise persons might attempt in vain, and foolish old Miss Skipwith succeeded without any difficulty in breaking down the barrier of hostility which Mark Chetwode had conceived against all who dwelt at the Priory. She did not indeed persuade him that he had no grievance, but she conveyed to him the impression that the present holder of estates which had belonged for centuries to the Chetwode family was as innocent a sinner as Louis XVI., and she made him feel that his quarrel was rather with circumstances than with individuals. She interested him, too, by what she told him about her nephew and niece. She led the way down the zig-zag path, talking volubly the whole time, and pausing every now and then to glance over her

shoulder, while she laid bare her simple hopes and fears.

Morton Bligh was a dreadful man—a man who had openly avowed his disbelief in revealed religion, and who had, besides, all his life long deliberately and persistently neglected the duties imposed upon him by birth. It would be a sad calamity for Abbotsport if ever Morton were to succeed his father.

"He cares nothing for the place. I doubt if he would ever live there. All he would do would be to exact every penny of rent that was due to him, and laugh if he were told that any of his tenants in the village were starving. With Cicely it would be very different; she loves the people and they love her. I don't say that she wouldn't make mistakes, because she is very young and headstrong, but at least her mistakes would be upon the right side."

"Possibly," said Mark, "Mr. Bligh may be aware of all this, and may dispose of his property accordingly."

Miss Skipwith sighed. "Of course he is aware of it," she answered, "but Wilfrid also is headstrong in his own way; nobody can dictate to him. He will do what he thinks right; and just now, I am afraid, he does not think it would be right to pass over his son. Morton, knowing how ill his father is, has come down here to show how well he can behave. Unfortunately he has few opportunities of behaving badly in a place such as this. Still, he is very rude and disagreeable: that, I suppose, he can't help being."

."I think," said Mark, smiling, "that the young lady's chances look promising."

"Ah, but there are complications. She has a cousin, an officer in a cavalry regiment, whom my brother-in-law has virtually adopted, and who is at present staying with us on leave. I daresay you can guess what *his* ambition is; and the worst of it is that Wilfrid is quite inclined to encourage him. Wilfrid is like most men; he can't believe that a woman can safely be entrusted with authority; and though he has never said so, I know perfectly well that nothing would please him more than to see Archie married to Cicely. Then, I think, he would probably make Archie his heir."

"And would that be such a very bad arrangement?"

"First-cousin marriages are always a bad arrangement," said Miss Skipwith, decisively; "but setting that aside, the arrangement would be bad because it would make Cicely unhappy. She has always been accustomed to rule; she wouldn't understand how to play second fiddle. I would rather that she had to leave Abbotsport altogether than that she should remain here in a subordinate position. Added to which, I don't see why that young man should have everything his own way. It isn't as if he were worthy to tie Cicely's shoe-strings."

"What does she herself think about it?" Mark inquired. "In England that is always an important question, I believe."

Miss Skipwith replied that that was, no doubt, a very important question, but that she was unable to answer it. All she knew was that Cicely seemed to like being with him, and that they were together a

great deal more than she, for her part, thought desirable or even proper. "But people's ideas have changed so much since I was young," she added sorrowfully. "This very afternoon they have gone out in a boat together, which in former times would have been considered quite an impossible thing to do. To be sure they have a third person with them—-a young Mr. Dare, who lives near this—but even so I can't think it right. And now if there is too much sea for them to get into the harbour they may be out half the night, for anything that we can do to prevent it."

It appeared, indeed, that Miss Skipwith was far more disquieted upon the score of propriety than upon that of physical risk; and this surprised her companion, because the nearer he drew to the sea the more he became aware that dirty weather was setting in. When they had passed down the steep, narrow street of the village and had reached the jetty, they found themselves in the midst of a group of experienced persons who were unanimously of opinion that the lugger which could be seen running before the wind towards the harbour's mouth was attempting a hazardous feat. It was now blowing something like half a gale, and the entrance of the harbour, which lay between the wooden jetty and the concrete breakwater, was marked by an ugly white line of foam where the waves curled and struck.

"Will they be able to get in?" asked Miss Skipwith anxiously of an ancient mariner in a sou'-wester.

"As much as they will, mum," answered the man. "You may say there is room, but you can't say no more. Oh, you ain't no call to be afeard, mum; they

won't be drownded, though they might get a wetting. We'll get 'em ashore safe enough. But with the boat, you see, 'tis different. Once she gets upon that there bar she'll go to pieces for certain. 'Tis wrong to make light of other men's property in that way, and Coppard ought to have known a deal better than to do such things."

"Oh, if that is all, I am sure Mr. Bligh will be only too happy to pay for the boat," Miss Skipwith declared confidently.

Meanwhile the lugger was approaching her destination at a great rate of speed. Presently, the forms and features of all those who were on board were clearly discernible. Bobby Dare, with the tiller in his hand, was standing up, his keen eyes fixed upon the water ahead; Coppard, holding the sheet, was ready to lower the sail at the word of command; and it is a pity that neither Miss Skipwith nor Mark Chetwode possessed knowledge enough of seamanship to appreciate a manœuvre which elicited murmurs of admiration from their better instructed neighbours. However, when once a thing has been done everyone sees how easy it was to do it, and as soon as the Rover had been brought alongside of the landing-steps, her handiness obtained more praise than Mr. Dare's skill. "Told 'ee so, mum," grunted the fisherman in the sou'-wester (who had done nothing of the sort). "Bless yer 'eart, with a craft like that there a child could make this 'arbour at any tide and in any weather."

Miss Skipwith said, "Really? Well, I am very glad to hear it, I'm sure; it looks to me dreadfully dangerous."

She picked her way gingerly down the slippery steps, and began to administer one of the mild remonstrances to her niece which she ventured upon from time to time, much as a man across whose land a right of way has been established will close his gates once a year, in formal assertion of a privilege which has practically ceased to be his. "My dear Cicely," she exclaimed, "what a fright you have given us; you really should think a little more of what you are doing, and —and of other people's feelings. You, I daresay, would have thought it very good fun to be kept out at sea half through the night, but it would not have been at all good fun either for your father or for me to be left for hours in uncertainty as to whether you were alive or dead. I should have thought," added the old lady severely, "that Mr. Archibald might have remembered that, even if you forgot it."

When Miss Skipwith wished to be especially impressive it was her habit to speak of Archie as Mr. Archibald. She was perhaps aware that the designation irritated him.

"Well, we haven't remained out half through the night, you see, Aunt Susan," said Cicely, composedly; "so that there is no occasion to blame anybody. At all events, it would be most unjust to blame poor Archie, because nobody could have been more anxious than he was to get into harbour again. In fact, he simply insisted upon our risking our lives to do it."

Having thus, as it were, fired right and left with effect, Miss Bligh proceeded to disembark. Declining the proffered assistance of her two admirers, she laid her hand for an instant upon the shoulder of old Cop-

pard, who was clinging to the jetty with his boathook, and sprang lightly out on the steps. But the steps were overgrown with seaweed, and so it came to pass that this self-reliant young lady's foot slipped, and that she would have fallen ignobly upon her nose, but for a pair of arms which were opportunely stretched out to save her. These she instinctively clutched until she had recovered her balance, when she became aware that they belonged to a young man whom she had never seen before, and who took off his hat, which he held for a moment in his hand, instead of at once replacing it after the English fashion. "I beg your pardon," he said.

"It is I who ought to beg yours," answered Cicely, laughing. "I wonder I didn't knock you down."

Cicely did not know the meaning of the word shyness. She was as much at her ease with a total stranger as with an intimate friend, and this was one of her idiosyncrasies which her aunt never quite knew whether to admire or to deprecate.

"Cicely, my dear," said the old lady, "let me introduce Mr. Chetwode, of whom you have often heard your father speak. Mr. Chetwode very kindly gave me permission to walk through his grounds just now."

The young man's hat was once more raised, while Cicely bestowed a little bow and a scrutinising gaze upon him.

She was much interested in the owner of Upton Chetwode, and had felt no slight anxiety to see what manner of man he was. Her first impression—and, like all women, she attached great importance to first impressions—was decidedly favourable. Handsome he

could hardly be called; perhaps too, on closer inspection, his face was somewhat older than his figure; but he had undoubtedly the appearance of a gentleman, and what was better still was that he had not at all the appearance of an ordinary English gentleman. His colourless, expressionless face invited interrogation. All sorts of things might be hidden behind that seemingly impenetrable mask, which a young woman of inquiring bent might find amusement in calling forth. It is even possible that, without being aware of it, Miss Bligh may have been a trifle piqued by the absence of that tribute of frank admiration which she was accustomed to detect in the eyes of all men and to accept as her due.

"So you have come home at last," she said.

He shrugged his shoulders slightly. "I've come to my house," he replied. "At present I can't say that I feel very much at home there."

He spoke with just the faintest suspicion of a foreign accent, and Cicely noticed that his boots and gloves (had he any business to be wearing gloves at all?) were not of English make, although the rest of his costume was.

"Oh, but you must learn to feel at home here," she declared. "Aren't you proud of being an Englishman? You ought to be, you know."

"I will try to be as proud as I ought to be," he answered gravely, "if you will kindly tell me the way to set about it. How should one begin?"

During the above interchange of remarks the whole party had been moving along the jetty, and it now occurred to Cicely that conversation might be carried on

with less risk of interruption if one member of it were got rid of. Accordingly she turned round and extended her hand to the selected victim, saying. "Good-night, Bobby, and many thanks for the sail. Don't forget to give my love to your sisters."

"Oh, I'll walk part of the way home with you, if you don't mind," said poor Bobby, who was in no such hurry to be dismissed.

"But I do mind very much indeed; and Sir George will mind very much indeed if you are late for dinner. Do you know what time it is? You will only just save yourself, even if you run."

Now Sir George Dare, who never waited dinner for anybody, would assuredly not have dreamt of waiting for this young son of his; but Bobby was too completely under the sway of the imperious Cicely to dispute her commands. He took his leave sadly and submissively; and then she observed, "As for you, Mr. Chetwode, your way is the same as ours, for some little distance at all events."

"Indeed!" he said; "that is very fortunate for me." But he did not speak as if he felt her companionship to be any great privilege, and she glanced at him with an innocent surprise at his indifference which almost made him laugh.

"Now tell me," said he, to account for the smile which he could not altogether suppress, "how I am to convert myself into a good John Bull. Will it be easy, do you think?"

She frowned slightly. "Of course it will not be easy," she answered, "if you prefer being a foreigner;

but really that seems to me a very odd sort of taste to have. Because, you see, you *are* an Englishman."

"More or less of one."

"Why, your family is English; everybody belongs to his father's family. I know you have been brought up in Russia, but that's only an accident. You wouldn't have been a cannibal if you had been brought up in the Fiji Islands, I hope."

"I venture to hope not. Still there is no saying to what lengths one may not be carried by the influence of early associations. I have no reason to love England, whereas I have—or at least I suppose I ought to have—many reasons for loving Russia, where most of my friends and all my relations reside."

"Well," said Cicely, with fine liberality, "there is something in that, no doubt. At the same time, I shouldn't care to be neither the one thing nor the other, if I were you. Being English, and having property in England, I should wish to live on my property and do the best I could for it. And most likely that is just what you do wish, or you wouldn't have come home."

Mark's grave face was lighted up for an instant by a smile, and he glanced at the girl with more interest than he had hitherto displayed in her.

"Possibly you are right," he answered; "possibly that is what I want, but really I am not very sure about it. My property, as you know, has shrunk to such small dimensions that I should hardly find employment in looking after it, and my actual reason for coming here was the very simple one that an empty house is too expensive a luxury for me."

"You might quite well live here without being at home all the year round," said the girl, "and as for employment, a country gentleman need never be without that."

And straightway she began to point out to him how he might occupy his time agreeably to himself and profitably to his neighbours. She had not the most distant comprehension of the man to whom she was talking; her ideas of life and happiness and duty were necessarily circumscribed, but she had perfect confidence in their accuracy, and, such as they were, she expressed them well. As for Mark, he was not particularly interested in her ideas, but he became a good deal interested in her, and it was with unaffected regret that he wished her good-bye on being informed that the point at which their paths diverged had been reached. He did not, however, offer to walk any further than that point, nor did he respond, save by an inarticulate murmur, to Miss Bligh's expressed hope that they might meet again before long.

"I think he is rather queer, and rather nice," was the verdict which his unusual behaviour elicited from Cicely after he had withdrawn.

But Archie, who during all this time had been relegated to the background, and whose temper had not been improved by the enforced society of Miss Skipwith, said:

"I don't know so much about his being nice; he's queer enough for anything. One can forgive a Frenchman for trying to look like an Englishman, though of course he never succeeds; but there must be something very

wrong indeed about an Englishman who tries to look like a Frenchman—especially when he does succeed."

"Oh, I daresay he will learn better things in time," answered Cicely. "In fact," she added demurely, "I feel sure he will, because I mean to take him in hand."

And the disgusted grunt with which this announcement was received was doubtless a source of amusement and gratification to her.

CHAPTER IX.

MORTON REPRESENTS THE FAMILY.

It seemed that Miss Skipwith could not say enough in praise of Mr. Chetwode that evening. He was clever, he was distinguished, he had a singular charm of manner; she had not for a long time met anyone who had so impressed her with a sense of his superiority to the common run of men. She prattled on in this way both before and in the course of dinner; and her brother-in-law could not imagine why, until it dawned upon him that this artless schemer proposed to set the new-comer up as a counter attraction to Archie. That discovery tickled him, and he led her on by a few careless, disparaging observations, which eventually had the effect of drawing his daughter into the arena.

"He may not be such a black swan as Aunt Susan makes him out; but at all events he is our nearest neighbour, and of course he must be called upon," said Cicely, decidedly.

"It is always comforting to have one's duty set be-

fore one in such plain language," remarked Mr. Bligh. "The only question is, who is to call upon him? *I* can't, because I have no legs; and I'm afraid conventionality would hardly allow of your doing it, my dear. Would the emergency be met by my sending a groom over with my card, do you think?"

Cicely shook her head.

"Much too formal," said she. "He wouldn't like it; he would take it as an intimation that you were willing to acknowledge him, but didn't care about cultivating him."

"*Do* I care about cultivating him?" inquired Mr. Bligh.

"You know you do," replied his daughter, tranquilly; "you know you are unhappy in your mind about that land of his, and you would like to have a chance of explaining to him that it isn't your fault that you are in possession of it."

"If I know myself," said Mr. Bligh—"but possibly I don't know myself—that is quite the last subject which I should wish to discuss with him. My title, I am assured, is a perfectly good title, legitimately acquired. If he thinks differently, he can go to law about it; but I doubt whether he and I should become better friends by talking the matter over."

"Oh, you will talk the matter over," said Cicely, confidently. "He has taken up a wrong view of it, and you will have to set him right. Only there *is* a little difficulty about the first step, I admit. How would it do to write and ask him to dine?"

"I should not venture to take such a liberty," Mr. Bligh declared; and Miss Skipwith, who was very punc-

tilious, was also of opinion that that suggestion was inadmissible.

"My dear," said she, "there must be a visit, and the visit must be returned, before any invitation can be sent."

"Well, then," said Cicely, "perhaps Archie might go, and take papa's card with him."

Archie looked recalcitrant; but before he could open his lips Morton had thrown himself into the breach.

"It seems to me," observed the latter languidly, "that I am marked out by fate as the proper person to undertake this act of social servitude. At what time do you suppose that your friend goes out for a walk, Cicely? At four o'clock?"

Cicely looked doubtfully at her brother. She could hardly dispute his right to represent the head of the family, but she was pretty sure that he did not entertain the friendly and neighbourly sentiments of the head of the family, and she thought it very likely that he would be rude to Mr. Chetwode.

"I know nothing about his habits," she said; "but I hope he may be out when you call."

"Thanks, very much; so do I. Perhaps you hope that for his sake, though, not for mine."

"Well, for your sake, and for his sake, and for everybody's sake. I don't think you would get on particularly well together, and I want him to like us."

For some reason or other this remark appeared to amuse Morton, who began to laugh, and who laughed even more heartily when he noticed the frown on Archie's brow.

"Oh, you needn't be afraid," he returned; "he shall like us. Not me as an individual, perhaps—that would be a little too much to hope for—but he shall like us collectively, and when he has dined here I have no doubt that he will like you in particular. That, however, will naturally depend upon yourself. As for me, I will put on my best clothes and my best manners to-morrow afternoon, and I humbly trust that I may not disgrace the family."

Morton was as good as his word. After luncheon on the following day he set out on foot for Upton Chetwode, much though he disliked pedestrian exercise. There was, however, one thing that he disliked even more, which was getting upon the back of a horse; and Miss Skipwith had appropriated the carriage. For that matter, the walk was not a disagreeable one, being over grass or footpaths the whole way, and he had plenty of interesting reflections to keep him company.

Since his arrival at the Priory Morton Bligh had been somewhat dejected in mind. His presence under his father's roof was, of course, due to a motive which everybody had divined, and which he himself had decided that it would be stupid and clumsy to conceal. His father was going to die; he was his father's natural and legitimate heir, and it was necessary for him to show that, whatever he might be, or have been, he could live an outwardly decent and respectable life. It was necessary, he thought, for him to do this, because he believed his father to be one of those scrupulous persons who always set duty above inclination, and because he could form a tolerably shrewd guess what Mr. Bligh's inclinations were. But his father's

demeanour had puzzled him. Mr. Bligh had been perfectly good-humoured, tolerant, and amiable, had not repulsed him, nor made the faintest allusion to incidents which could not have been alluded to without embarrassment; yet not a word had been spoken as to the management of the property, or as to any of the topics to which a dying man might be expected to refer in conversation with his successor. It was plain—or so, at all events, Morton feared—that the dying man's will had not yet been signed. Now there was very little probability that Cicely would be placed in her brother's shoes. One does not replace a son by a daughter, and Morton himself had a contempt for women which he suspected his father of sharing to a considerable extent. But doubtless a nephew who has married your only daughter and who bears your own name may, at a pinch, be made to do duty for a son who has been weighed in the balance and found wanting. This was what troubled Morton. He saw, and could not help seeing—even Miss Skipwith saw it—that Archie was receiving every encouragement to propose to Cicely; he saw, what perhaps Miss Skipwith was too blinded by prejudice to see, that the young soldier had fallen desperately in love with his cousin; and, for his own part, he was only too well aware that nobody would pity him if he were to receive a substantial money legacy instead of his birthright.

His record, in truth, was shockingly bad. It was not only that he had led a life of idle dissipation, and that his debts had had to be paid for him more than once; it was not only that he had gone his own way, taking no notice of his father and sister, and never so

much as writing a letter to them from year's end to year's end: these are offences which may be pardoned. But (being by no means devoid of brains, and having a certain mischievous bent of mind) he had at one time amused himself by reading up the indictments which have been brought by learned men against accepted systems of theology, and though he was in reality no scholar, he had written articles in advanced reviews which had gained for him a certain notoriety. That had been a great mistake, and he was very sorry now that he had committed it, because, as a matter of fact, he did not care two straws what mankind at large might be pleased to believe in and worship. However, there it was in black and white, and there was no getting out of it. Worse things, moreover, than that might be said of him. London society in these days has not the name of being over-squeamish; yet there were many men and many women in London who would not be seen speaking to Morton Bligh.

And so the long and the short of it was, that if by any means Cicely could be prevented from marrying Archie, that end must be accomplished. Therefore Morton was on his way to call upon Mark Chetwode, in whom he had observed with satisfaction that his sister's interest had been powerfully aroused. Archie, it might be assumed, would not be made Mr. Bligh's heir if he did not marry Cicely; Mark Chetwode would surely not be raised to that enviable position if he did. And Chetwode was poor, and Cicely was not only pretty but would have a fortune of thirty or forty thousand pounds at least.

The solitary denizen of Upton Chetwode was smok-

ing a cigarette in his comfortless dining-room when his visitor was announced. After a somewhat formal greeting, he expressed a hope that the latter did not mind the smell of tobacco, to which Morton replied that he would be grateful if he too might be allowed to smoke.

A man who will smoke with you is by that very fact to some extent a companionable creature, and Morton's manners were pleasant enough when he took the trouble to make them so. Mark rather liked the man, though (as he was accustomed to scrutinise men and motives) it did not take him very long to discover that there was some unavowed reason for this display of neighbourly courtesy. Morton, it should be mentioned, had deplorable nerves. Without being precisely a glutton or a sot, he had nevertheless for many years habitually eaten and drunk more than was good for him, besides having taken very little exercise; and the consequence was that when he attempted to be artful, he speedily made his aims evident to a practised observer. Mark, cold, temperate, and constitutionally suspicious, was a great deal more than a match for him. They discussed (for what else could they begin by discussing?) local topics and local means of passing the time; Morton avowed his abhorrence of the country and was pleased to learn that his host was no great lover of field sports.

"You'll be bored to death down here," he said; "that's a matter of course. But, perhaps, if you're inclined to be charitable, you'll sometimes come over to the Priory and relieve our chronic boredom. I haven't any inducement to offer you beyond a sincere welcome and the governor's Madeira, which I can conscientiously

praise. By-the-way, he sent you all sorts of messages and apologies. He would have come to pay his respects to you in person, but he never gets beyond the garden now, as I daresay you have heard from my old aunt. You have won Aunt Susan's heart, I must tell you; and as for Cicely—well, I suppose it wouldn't be proper to say that she has lost her heart to you," laughed Morton; "but anyhow she is very anxious to see more of you. Won't you come and dine quietly some evening?"

Mark said what was polite and necessary in reply. He began in a casual, indifferent way to put indirect questions; also he rang the bell, and ordered brandy and soda, of which his guest was pleased to partake freely; and so, in about twenty minutes, he found out all he wanted to know. That Morton was not upon the best of terms with his father, that he was in mortal dread of being ousted by his cousin Archie, and that he was only sojourning at the Priory now in the hope of bringing personal influence to bear against the interloper—all this was elicited, without effort on the one side or consciousness of self-betrayal on the other, and all doubt as to the nature of Morton's scheme was removed when that ingenuous plotter remarked:—

"I assure you that I don't half like the idea of having to spend the rest of my life in this neighbourhood: but it will have to come to that, I expect. And I shall be all alone too; for it isn't over and above likely that my sister will care to stay and keep house for me. She will have a fortune of her own—something like fifty thousand pounds, probably." (For Morton thought there could be no harm in adding a trifle of £10,000 or so to his mental estimate.)

"Your cousin is a very good-looking young man," said Mark, with his faint smile, and his slight foreign accent. "I should like to be your cousin."

"I don't call him good-looking; and he's as stupid as an owl," returned Morton. "Why should you want to change places with him?"

"Oh, only a fancy, which perhaps it is impertinent in me to mention. Seeing them together, it struck me that he was upon terms of something more than friendship with your sister, that was all. So much beauty, and £50,000 besides—you must admit that he is enviable."

"I think," said Morton, who had swallowed two rather strong glasses of brandy and soda, "that if I were ten years younger, and if I admired a girl with Cicely's advantages, I should be no more afraid of such a fellow as Archie than I should be afraid of the curate or the doctor."

Having delivered himself of this statement with much impressiveness, he rose to depart. Mark's speech had been unquestionably impertinent — even very impertinent; but Morton did not resent it. On the contrary, he was quite pleased to have been furnished with an opportunity of asserting so unequivocally that Archie was no formidable antagonist. Thus it is that the reasoning powers of the brain become enfeebled when the other organs of the body are not kept in a proper state of subjection.

"You'll come to dinner, then, some day soon, won't you?" he said, with a slight thickness of utterance, as he held out his limp little hand. "I'll tell Cicely to send you a formal invitation, though you won't be asked

to a formal party. I believe we do give formal dinner-parties from time to time, but we won't be so brutal as to include you among our victims."

When he had gone, Mark laughed a little and walked once or twice up and down the room; and then, taking up his pen, resumed the letter which had been interrupted by the entrance of the visitor.

"It seems to me," he wrote, "that I am in a fair way towards carrying out your benevolent programme. The brother of the young lady whom you were so kind as to select for my future partner through life has just been calling here, and has hinted broadly—possibly a little too broadly—that he would be charmed to welcome me as his brother-in-law. Naturally he has his reasons: he is not quite so disinterested as you are. He thinks that his father wishes to bring about a marriage between Miss Cicely (that, I believe, is her name) and a young cousin of whom old Mr. Wingfield spoke to me, and whom I forget whether I mentioned to you or not. In the case of that project succeeding, the young cousin, it seems, would be made heir to the entire property; but it is not considered likely that any other son-in-law than the cousin would be preferred before the heir-apparent. Consequently I am implored to come forward, and a bribe of £50,000 is offered to me by way of inducement. Would you believe that, poor as I am, I hesitate to take advantage of this generous suggestion? I am sure you would not believe it if you saw Miss Bligh, who happens to be quite pretty and agreeable, and that it would be difficult to convince you how little her charms have to say to the matter. Do you think £50,000 a very large sum of money? In

all truth and candour, I think liberty is worth more than that; but I am aware that upon such points your ideas differ from mine."

Having wound up his letter, and addressed it to Madame Souravieff, he put on his hat and walked down to the iron railing which divided the garden from the park. Upon this he dropped his arms, and so stood for a long time, revolving many considerations in his mind. It was quite true that a bribe of £50,000 hardly tempted him, welcome though such a supply of hard cash would have been to a man in his straitened circumstances; it was also true that Cicely's personal attractions had left him cold. If you are not in love with a woman, what can it signify whether she is pretty or ugly? But there was one thing he cared about a good deal, and always rather wondered at himself for caring about, which was the recovering of the lands of which he considered that he had been wrongfully dispossessed. No one can relinquish without something of a pang and a wrench the religious faith in which he has been brought up; and in much the same way Mark Chetwode found it impossible to free himself from the impressions which had been dinned into his ears from his earliest childhood. Legally speaking, he might have no sort of case against these prosperous, wealthy, condescending Blighs, but he could not help longing to be avenged upon them, to get the better of them; and if this desire could not be satisfied in one way, perhaps it might be in another. To get the better of the debilitated creature who had just left him would surely be a task of no great difficulty; and as to the cousin, he appeared to be a very commonplace person. There remained

Mr. Bligh, with whom, of course, it would be needful to ingratiate oneself; but, as far as could be gathered from report, Mr. Bligh was only too eager to find some heir who might decently be substituted for his son. Was the stake worth playing for? Mark eventually decided that it was; and, oddly enough, what helped him towards this decision was his conviction that if ever success should seem to be within his reach, he would have no more vehement opponent to contend against than Madame Souravieff.

CHAPTER X.

CICELY HAS POOR SPORT.

In these days, hunting ladies are so numerous that it is scarcely more necessary to apologise for them than George III. thought it necessary to write an apology for the Bible. Nevertheless, there still remain certain old-fashioned people who think that a woman is out of her place in the hunting-field, and of these Miss Skipwith was one. She had never felt able to approve of her niece following the hounds, and although she had never been able to prevent her niece from doing that, or anything else which the self-willed young woman in question intended to do, she considered herself bound to uphold her testimony from time to time—that is, as often as the hounds met within manageable distance of the Priory. And it is needless to add that the escort of Archie Bligh did not present itself to her in the light of a mitigating circumstance. But what could she do when the girl's own father backed her up, and refused

to see the slightest impropriety in her enjoying what he called a "good healthy gallop" in the company of her cousin? Mr. Bligh had himself been an ardent sportsman until his health had broken down; he had perhaps a somewhat exaggerated admiration for the virtues which sport, combined with a spice of danger, brings into prominence; and possibly he did not sufficiently recognise that, although bravery may be a very fine thing, the kind of bravery which life demands of women is of a very different class from that which it demands of men.

And so, when the hounds met at Upton Mill, it was altogether useless for Miss Skipwith to try and defraud Cicely and Archie of a happy day.

"My dear Susan," said Mr. Bligh, in response to certain oft-repeated remonstrances of hers, "they mean to be there, and it is my belief that neither you nor I can hold them back by anything short of hamstringing every horse in the stables; to which I am not prepared to consent. You need not be so alarmed; they won't come to any harm. One is only young for a few years, and during these few years wise young people make the most of their time."

"You speak as if we were only here to amuse ourselves, Wilfrid," said Miss Skipwith, in a dissatisfied tone of voice.

"Do I? I have never been able to discover exactly what we are here for; and, with all due deference, I doubt whether you can tell me. But one thing I know: we are born with certain cravings which are bound to be satisfied in this way or in that; and for my part I have always been strongly on the side of physical exer-

tion and exhaustion. You think perhaps that a young man and a young woman who go out hunting together are like a young man and a young woman in a ball-room; but then you have never hunted. I am going to put Archie up on the Flying Dutchman, and I know what that means, though you don't. When once hounds are running he will forget all about Cicely, and what is better still, Cicely, who is going to ride Hypatia, will forget all about him. Ah, if I could only have one more day with them—just one more before I die!"

Perceiving that it was a waste of time to reason with a man who could talk in that way, Miss Skipwith sighed and gave in, and kept her own opinion, as usual; and one fine morning Archie and Cicely trotted off to the meet, without let or hindrance. Morton declined to accompany them, owning with his customary frankness that he had no longer nerve to hunt.

"I have only one neck," he said, "and nothing would annoy me more than to break it. However, I wouldn't for the world deter you from breaking yours." And this was as true and honest an assertion as any assertion could be.

Hunting had already ceased in many parts of England, but that was a late country.

"We go on up to the last permissible moment," Cicely informed her companion, "and begin again at the first. The worst of it is that I can't hunt at all regularly now, because it isn't thought right for me to go out quite alone."

"Well, I'll be here as much and as often as I can," Archie replied.

"Thank you; that is very kind of you. But you

must please to remember that when you are here your duty will be simply to escort me to the meet. From the moment we have found you will cease to have any responsibility, and you will only think of your own interests. I am very well able to take care of myself, and if I catch you attempting to take care of me I will never forgive you. Mind that."

Archie laughed and said: "All right, then; I quite understand."

He was very well pleased with his mount—a powerful, free-going grey; but as he had never ridden the horse before, he could not be aware, as his uncle was, that he was bestriding one of the best hunters that ever was bred, and he fully intended to keep an eye upon his cousin, even though this should prove to his own detriment. Cicely's chestnut mare was an animal of quite another class—nervous, high couraged and requiring a light hand and a good deal of riding; but Cicely was an accomplished horsewoman.

"The mare will be all right after the first few minutes," she said, in reply to some expression of uneasiness on Archie's part. "Unless something upsets her at starting she will be as good as gold. You needn't trouble your head about her—or about me either."

But of course he could not help troubling his head about her, and although he admired her seat and her hands, he was vexed and surprised that his uncle should have given her such a mount. As a matter of fact, Mr. Bligh, who did not himself know the meaning of the word fear, had perfect confidence in Cicely's

skill, and would have trusted her with any horse in his stables.

At the meet, which was in a central locality, a great concourse of people was assembled. There was young Lord Shoreham, the M.F.H., whose language was apt to be more emphatic than choice, and of whom every-body stood in awe; there was Sir George Dare, a ruddy-cheeked, white-whiskered gentleman, with a good-humoured smile, and a high, squeaky voice; there, too, was Bobby, looking somewhat ill-at-ease upon the fiddle-headed, raw-boned steed which had been assigned to him. Bobby was not at all fond of hunting, and every time he went out he did so with the full assurance that he carried his life in his hands. That risk, however, he was always willing, like a true-born British sailor, to accept, and he was now about to imperil his neck with more or less of cheerfulness upon the off-chance of earning Cicely's approval. He rode up to her side as soon as she appeared upon the scene, although, while according him a smiling greeting, she warned him not to approach too closely.

"Keep clear of the mare's heels," she said, as, notwithstanding her signal, he drew nearer: "otherwise you may get a broken leg before you know where you are."

But Bobby, who thought he was in much more danger of getting a broken heart, chose to disregard this caution. His father had engaged Archie in conversation, so that presently he had the privilege of riding with Miss Bligh to the covert-side, and hearing from her own lips that she did not want to have anything more to do with her cousin.

"I know that he is possessed with the idea that he is in charge of me," she said; "and I am sure he will keep looking over his shoulder the whole time—which will exasperate me beyond all bearing. Considering that I know every yard of the country, and that he hasn't ridden over it since he was a boy of sixteen, I really think he would do more wisely to mind his own business, and leave me to mind mine."

Bobby cordially concurred. At the same time he did not quite like the look of Cicely's plunging, bucking mare, and he said with a sigh: "I wish I were capable of taking charge of you; but it is as much as I shall accomplish to make this brute of mine answer his helm, even if we don't part company altogether, as I daresay we shall before long." He added, in a melancholy voice: "I suppose you utterly despise a man who can't ride, don't you?"

Now it was true that Cicely thought every man ought to be able to manage a horse. Sailors, no doubt, are to some extent privileged persons, yet she could not help finding any human being who held on by his reins a trifle ridiculous, and poor Bobby would perhaps have been better advised if he had remained at home that morning. Therefore she left his question unanswered, and after a time he put another one to her: "Are cavalry men always flyers across a country?" he inquired diffidently.

"Really, I can't tell you," she answered, laughing; "but I don't know why they should be. If Archie sees more of the run than you or I do, he won't have much to brag about. The Dutchman will ask nothing more of him than to stick to his saddle."

Bobby was by no means confident of his own capacity to comply even with that modest requirement; but he was pleased to hear himself bracketed with Cicely, and he resolved to keep alongside of her if he could. That, however, was a programme which he probably could not, under any circumstances, have carried out, and, as it chanced, he lost sight of her almost immediately after deciding upon it. For scarcely had the covert been drawn when a fox was found and got away, and for ten minutes after that event all control over his own movements was taken out of the young sailor's hands. His career, though brief, was glorious. He was borne at a high rate of speed down a steep hill side, he was lifted, to his utter amazement, over three stiff fences, after each of which experiences he found himself with his arms round his horse's neck, and when at length he was deposited quite easily and comfortably in a bed of rushes, he did not in the least realise why he was there, until he became aware of a broad stream in front of him, and came to the just conclusion that his horse had declined to attempt impossibilities.

Cicely, meanwhile, had got off badly. Both she and her mare were taken by surprise, and for several hundred yards they were much hampered by the too numerous field. At the first fence the mare jumped short and very nearly landed on her nose. This perhaps roused her not very amiable temper: for no sooner had she recovered herself than she threw up her head and broke clean away. There was nothing to be done but to sit tight and keep cool. Cicely had sense enough and experience enough to know that: also she

had enough of both to be aware that she was in imminent danger of a bad fall. The mare, for the time being, had completely lost her senses, and would certainly rush blindly at any obstacle that might lie in her path. She might get over such obstacles or she might not: anyhow it was hopeless to attempt to steady her. And so it came to pass that Miss Bligh was only prevented by good luck from jumping upon the hounds, and that Lord Shoreham apostrophised her under his breath in terms quite unfit for reproduction. Her heart failed her a little when she saw a great ragged bullfinch before her, which it was scarcely within the bounds of possibility that she could clear without slackening speed, and she made up her mind that the end was at hand. However, she threw up her arm to protect her face, and was hurled through somehow or other, though not without a crash and a jerk which very nearly sent her out of her saddle. Immediately after this the mare began to falter, and was easily brought to a standstill in the middle of a ploughed field.

"I thought as much," murmured Cicely, as she slipped her foot out of the stirrup and sprang down to the ground; and a brief examination of her mount showed her that her suspicions had been only too well founded. The mare, with starting eyeballs and heaving flanks, was quiet enough now, while from a long jagged wound in her shoulder the blood was dripping slowly. It was very evident that not only could there be no more hunting for Miss Bligh that day, but that one of the best animals in her father's possession had been marked for life. This, it will be allowed, was no fault of Cicely's; but she felt very guilty all the same, and

the worst of it was that she could not judge what the extent of the mischief might be. She had no means of binding up the mare's wound, nor could she tell by a hasty inspection whether it was deep or merely superficial. All she knew was that it behoved her to lead the sufferer home without further loss of time; and this she immediately prepared to do, hooking up her riding habit and passing her arm through the bridle. One comfort was that she was in no danger of being bothered by offers of unskilled assistance; for Bobby Dare had disappeared, and on a distant hillside against the sky she could see Archie and his gallant grey sailing along in blissful unconsciousness of everything save the delightful fact that they had shown a clear pair of heels to their competitors. So, perceiving that there was a gate at the corner of the field, she made for it, and was soon on the high road which connects Abbotsport with the county town.

Along this road it so chanced that a landed proprietor of the vicinity was at that moment wending his lonely way. He was deeply immersed in thought and his eyes were cast down, so that he did not at once become aware that a lady leading a lame horse had debouched upon the grassy wayside ahead of him. As soon, however, as he did become aware of her he quickened his pace, caught her up and accosted her.

"How do you do, Miss Bligh?" said he, taking off his hat. "Why are you on foot? Have you had an accident?"

Cicely recognised Mr. Chetwode, without much pleasure at an encounter which she felt to be in-

opportune. She wanted to get home and she didn't want to talk.

"I'm afraid I have staked my mare," she answered. "Do you know anything about horses? Perhaps you can tell me whether she is badly hurt or not."

It did not seem very likely that this alien had any knowledge of such subjects, and she only put the question to him because she supposed that, being a man, he might feel slighted if she did not pay him the compliment of consulting him; but in truth, Mark, who had always been a lover of horses, possessed some little veterinary skill, and after a brief examination he was able to assure her that the damage done was comparatively trifling.

"I do not promise you that no trace of the mishap shall remain," said he. "The cut will have to be sewn up, and unluckily it is not a clean cut; but I think I may safely say that the real value of the animal will not be affected, although perhaps the selling value may be."

Cicely was relieved and was also decidedly impressed. She came of a sporting family, and although she was personally large-minded enough to admit that a man may be an admirable member of the community and yet not know a horse from a cow, she could not help thinking him a good deal more admirable if he did. She at once dropped into easy conversation with her companion, relating the particulars of her misadventure, to which he listened with deferential interest, while he paced slowly by her side.

"You ought to hunt," she remarked, after a time. "Why don't you?"

"For the best reason in the world," he answered. "I have no horses, and no money to buy any."

Cicely was silent for a moment or two. She had an uncomfortable feeling that although Mr. Chetwode's impecuniosity was no fault of hers, he might consider her father in some measure responsible for it.

"But really," she resumed at length, "I don't see how you can go on living here unless you hunt. There is nothing else to be done during the winter, you see. Except, of course, the shooting, which would help you through a few months."

"Only I can't afford either keepers or pheasants," observed Mark, with a smile. "Perhaps, however, I shall not go on living here."

"You mean that you will let your house again?"

"If I can find anyone sufficiently insane to take it. If I can't . . . ." He shrugged his shoulders and drew down the corners of his mouth expressively.

Thereupon Cicely read him a serious lecture. She declared emphatically that it is the plain duty of land-owners, whether rich or poor, to reside upon their land. "A tenant," she said, "can never take the place of the real owner of the soil, nor fulfil half his functions;" and this assertion she supported by instances and examples.

"After all, what will you do if you leave Upton Chetwode again, I wonder?" she inquired in conclusion.

"Ah!" he returned, lifting his eyebrows, "I wonder!"

He thought her very pretty, and her confident way of offering her opinion and advice amused him; but she did not touch his heart. Madame Souravieff would perhaps have said that he had no heart to be touched. And it may be that Cicely, who though no flirt yet was

accustomed to homage of a kind which this stranger showed no inclination to pay her, was a little puzzled and piqued by a failure of which she could not but be conscious: for she certainly took great pains to be pleasant to him, and even went so far as to hint that she could enter into his feelings about those ancestral possessions of his which had passed into other hands.

"Of course it must be horrid for you," she said, when he had informed her that the subject was rather a sore one with him; "but then if I were you, I think I should set before myself as an object the getting of that land back again. It would be something to live for."

He laughed.

"But in order to attain that object two things are indispensable—first that the present proprietor should be willing to sell, and secondly that I should have money enough to tempt him. How would you get over those difficulties, Miss Bligh?"

"I don't believe the first is a difficulty at all," she answered. "As for the second, money may be acquired after fifty fashions. Where there's a will there's a way."

She dismissed him at her father's gates, frankly expressing a hope that she might see him again soon, and if Mark placed a mistaken interpretation upon her words and demeanour, it would be hardly fair to blame him. He was not a coxcomb, but he had some excuse for thinking that he understood women, and it did appear to him that he had been invited in pretty plain language to offer himself as a candidate for the hand of the heiress. But before complying with that invitation it would perhaps be prudent to ascertain whether she really was to be an heiress or not.

CHAPTER XI.

COPPARD IN TROUBLE.

"Oh, we're quite convinced that you are guilty. We don't entertain any doubt at all as to that. But we have come to the conclusion that the evidence is insufficient, and therefore you will be discharged this time; and a very lucky fellow you are to get off, I can tell you—a precious lucky fellow! Now you take my advice and be very careful what you are about in future, because if you are brought up before us again you may not find us so disposed to be lenient."

This remarkable illustration of that fine old axiom of English law which declares every man innocent until he has been proved guilty was provided for the delectation of a limited audience by Sir George Dare, who was sitting upon the bench of justice, flanked by several anxious colleagues. Sir George's colleagues were always a little anxious about him; because in these evil days one never can be sure that there is not some mischievous busybody at hand taking notes, and it is of course most undesirable that paragraphs should get into the newspapers which may tend to lessen the respect of the public for the unpaid magistracy. But Sir George cared not two straws for his colleagues or the newspapers or the public, and nothing whatever was to be gained by digging your elbows into his ribs.

"What I think I shall say," he was wont to reply when counsels of prudence were offered to him, and if he thought it would do any culprit good to tell him

that he was a rascal, although his rascality could not be proved by strict rule of evidence, he never shrank from doing his duty to that culprit. The culprits had no objection. They knew that Sir George was a great deal more fond of scolding than of passing severe sentences, and they knew and cared as little about his law as he did himself.

The prisoner who had been addressed in the terms above-mentioned said: "Thank 'ee, sir," and touched his grey forelock, preparatory to resuming his position as an honest householder without a stain upon his character. David Coppard thought it no shame to be a poacher, and if he was a notorious thief, he was seldom so designated in his hearing, because of the length and strength of his arms. Behind his back he was, of course, liable, like the rest of us, to have unpleasant things said of him by malicious and cowardly persons: but no sensible man deigns to take notice of what may be said behind his back. Coppard was in the habit of borrowing (not stealing, which is a very different thing) the lines and nets and lobster-pots of his neighbours. This was an understood thing, and the freedom was readily pardoned by his neighbours in consideration of the borrower's admirable seamanship, which was almost always at their service. As for rabbits, everybody knows what mischief those animals do, and how much more they would do if their numbers were not kept down by the exertions of nocturnal sportsmen. But unfortunately there are certain miserable landlubbers whose minds are so warped by prejudice and selfishness that they begin to make a fuss if a man cannot

settle his little account for tea and sugar at the end of a year, and who will avail themselves of any paltry pretext that may come handy to get such a man into trouble. Thus it was that Mr. Coppard had been subjected to the indignity of arrest upon a charge of petty larceny, and had incurred no small inconvenience in obtaining the acquittal which was his due.

It will, perhaps, hardly be believed that anyone could be so mean as to give a fellow-citizen and constant customer into custody because a trumpery hammer belonging to him had been discovered in the possession of that fellow-citizen, yet this is what Simpkins, the Abbotsport grocer, had done; and as Coppard trudged homewards nothing seemed to him more obvious and just and essential than that he should take the first opportunity of paying Simpkins out. As for the hammer, he had no doubt made use of it. When a derelict hammer finds its way by some unexplained means to one's premises, and when one happens, oddly enough, to be in want of such an article at that very time, one naturally makes use of it. Surely the fact of its having a big S branded upon the handle does not saddle a busy man with the responsibility of running round to everybody in Abbotsport whose name begins with an S and inquiring if they have mislaid anything. The magistrates, at all events, had very properly decided that no such responsibility rested upon Mr. Coppard, and he was free from any feeling of rancour against them. Still the fact remained that he had been very badly treated. So that when, on reaching the high-road, he chanced to encounter Mr. Robert Dare and

young Mr. Bligh, he could not rest satisfied with touching his hat to these gentlemen, but must needs impart to them the story of his wrongs.

"A hunjust charge; that's where 'tis, you see, sir," said he, fixing his eye on Bobby, who looked the more sympathetic of the two. "I can't get no remedy, so they tell me; but it do come hard on a workin' man to be deprived of two days' earnings, not to mention the missus's bad temper, which I shall be sure to suffer from it soon as ever I get 'ome. I couldn't estimate this job at a farthing less than ten shillings out o' my pocket, sir."

Bobby's finger and thumb were at once inserted into his own. Bobby had a sneaking affection for old Coppard, though he was quite as well aware as his father that Coppard's character would not bear too close investigation.

But Archie, who had no foolish predilections of the kind, and who was in a bad humour into the bargain, said:—

"It strikes me that you have not much to complain about, my friend. People who are found in possession of stolen goods don't as a general rule get off scot-free, and I rather suspect that if I had been upon the bench you wouldn't have been at liberty at this moment."

Coppard bent his shaggy brows and from beneath them shot an angry glance at the speaker.

"Then, sir," said he, "I'm 'umbly thankful as you're not upon the bench now, nor likely to be. Nor likely to be," he added with emphasis, while he pocketed Bobby's half-sovereign, saying:—"Thank 'ee kindly,

Cap'en, and 'twill be a dooty and a pleasure to me to drink your good 'ealth. Likewise that of Sir George and all true gentlemen; which there ain't a many of 'em left, sir."

"Well, don't drink our healths more than once or twice, you know, Coppard," returned Bobby, laughing.

"He'll drink as long as he has any money to spend on drink, you may be sure," said Archie, when the two young men had resumed their walk. "What an ass you are to tip such an old ruffian! You're only stimulating the liquor traffic, and doing him a great deal more harm than good."

This being in all probability true, Bobby remained meekly silent. From the days when they had been boys together he had always been accustomed to be called an ass by Archie, and had always felt that the accusation was justified by facts. He had no sort of admiration for himself, while he had a great admiration for his companion, mingled with such envy as an honest man may entertain of one who has ever surpassed him in those attributes which are apt to excite general admiration. Wandering towards Abbotsport that morning, with a secret hope of meeting Cicely, he had met her cousin instead, and having been informed by the latter that Miss Bligh was spending the day at the Rectory, had generously invited him to come home to luncheon. This invitation Archie had accepted after a moment's hesitation. He did not want to be bored by the numerous Miss Dares, but he was still less desirous of returning to the Priory and struggling to keep upon terms of civility with Morton while deprived of Cicely's restraining influence; and Cicely had given him to un-

derstand that she had parish matters to talk over with Mrs. Lowndes which would keep her occupied until at least the middle of the afternoon.

"I hear you were in at the death the other day," remarked Bobby, after a pause.

"Oh, yes," answered the other, in a somewhat dissatisfied voice; "I couldn't have helped it unless I had tried. I certainly should have tried if I had known my cousin had come to grief; but I lost sight of her and took it for granted that her mare had refused the brook. What became of you?"

"Well, I can hardly tell you," replied Bobby. "After a bit I found myself standing on my head, and then I had a great piece of work to catch my brute of a horse. When I did catch him, I climbed up on his back and went home. It didn't occur to me that Miss Bligh might be in need of assistance."

"She wasn't in need of any assistance that you could have given her," responded Archie, rather unkindly. "A man who had known what he was about might have changed the saddles and saved her a long walk, that's all. As it happened, she fell in with that fellow Chetwode, who, she says, set her mind at ease. Though how he could have set her mind at ease without telling a pretty big cram I don't know, considering that the mare is marked for life."

Instowe, the residence of Sir George Dare, was a large, rambling white house of no architectural pretensions. That it was large was a fortunate circumstance, seeing that it corresponded in that respect with Sir George's family. Sir George was the father of five sons and six daughters. The former were all earning their

living, or almost earning it, in various professions, and only one of them, Bobby, was now at home: but the latter remained under the paternal roof, and Lady Dare feared that there was every possibility of their remaining there permanently, because it was useless to shut one's eyes to the fact that they were not pretty. Plain they could not fairly be called; but in a county cruelly denuded of bachelors there is little chance for girls who have only just escaped being plain, and as for seasons in London, Sir George declared that once in three years was the very utmost that his resources could be made to meet. Consequently Lady Dare was a little peevish at times.

She received the unexpected guest with a good deal of friendliness; and Archie, who had known the stout, grey-haired harassed-looking woman all his life, and had always been rather of a favourite of hers, was put into somewhat better humour by her cordiality. Archie, after all, was unmarried, and certain to be pretty well provided for by his rich uncle. It was said, to be sure, that he was smitten with his cousin; but that did not at all prove that his cousin was smitten with him, and the most unlikely events are for ever occurring. Lady Dare would have thought it very wrong and very foolish to show any lack of civility to the young soldier; nor were the six Misses Dare (whose ages ranged from seventeen to eight-and-twenty) remiss in welcoming this addition to the family luncheon-party. Good-humoured, rosy-faced Sir George, who bustled in just as the big bell on the top of the house was set going, was quite as hearty and much more disinterested. Sir George reposed his trust in Providence, and imagined that if his

daughters were destined to marry, the right man would turn up at the right time. He entertained no sort of hope of Archie Bligh, who, for his part, he sincerely trusted might marry Cicely and oust that worse than useless creature, Morton.

"Well," he said, as soon as he had taken his place at the head of the table and had commenced operations upon the joint before him, "we let off your friend Coppard this morning, Bobby. Not that he deserved it. There isn't a more poaching, thieving vagabond in these parts, and so I've told him scores of times. Much he cares what one tells him! Still the rascal has a wife and family."

"He has a great respect for you, Sir George," remarked Archie. "We met him on our way here, and Bobby gave him half-a-sovereign, which he said he would expend in drinking your health."

"The devil he did!" ejaculated Sir George. "Confound the fellow! Why I gave him half-a-crown myself to compensate him for his loss of time; and quite enough too. I tell you what it is, Bobby; if you're going to behave in this way, the sooner you get afloat again the better. Half-a-sovereign for stealing a hammer! At that rate the next time he helps himself to my pheasants he'll expect a five-pound note, I suppose."

"And very likely get it," remarked the eldest Miss Dare, who was credited by her family with a great deal of practical common sense. "Bobby," she continued, "may be excused; he knows no better. But really, Papa, I don't understand why you gave Coppard that half-crown."

"My dear, I have told you," replied Sir George.

"The man had lost a day's work; and after all it was a trumpery charge. Very shabby of Simpkins, in my opinion, and I shall certainly let him know what I think of him."

"I wish you would mention to him at the same time that he systematically sends us short measure of everything," said Lady Dare. "One gets one's groceries from the local man because it is one's duty, and one submits to their being very bad and very dear; but it is a little too much that he should swindle us into the bargain."

The conversation after this turned chiefly upon the misdeeds of Simpkins and others, and was utterly uninteresting to Archie, who ate his mutton in silence and wished himself away. Nor was he much better pleased when the topic of Lady Dare's annual ball, which was appointed to take place shortly, was introduced. He was obliged to say that he would be delighted to attend that festivity, but he inwardly resolved that his presence should be conditional upon that of Cicely, which he knew from her own lips to be as yet an uncertain factor.

But Lady Dare was not so well informed.

"I daresay," she remarked graciously, "that we may trust Cicely to see that you do not fail us. I haven't yet sent a card to your cousin Morton," she added in a dubious tone. "Do you think he would come?"

"I'm sure he would if he suspected that you didn't want him," said Archie. "Of course you don't want him."

"Well, under all the circumstances——" began Lady Dare. But the circumstances could not be dis-

cussed before her daughters, so she left her sentence unfinished.

"Don't forget to ask Chetwode, by the way," called out Sir George from the other end of the table. "I rode over to call upon him the other day, but he wasn't at home. You've seen him, I suppose, Archie?"

"Oh, yes, several times," answered Archie. "He was dining with us last night."

"Was he really? I'm very glad to hear that. There was an estrangement, you know, in his father's time—quite uncalled for—and I was afraid this young man might keep it up. And what is he like, eh? Pleasant sort of fellow?"

"I should think most people would call him so," Archie was generous enough to reply; "I haven't talked very much to him myself."

"He is dreadfully impoverished, I understand," observed Lady Dare, with a sigh which was not altogether caused by pity for the impoverished one.

"He can't help that, poor beggar!" returned her good-natured husband.

"He might have helped it, by all accounts. However," added Lady Dare, with another sigh, "it doesn't concern us."

After this there was a long discussion as to who was and who was not coming to the dance, and whether Lord Shoreham would put in an appearance, and whether, if he did, he would behave himself decently, and so forth—all of which was a weariness to Archie, who wanted to get away. He did not get away until the afternoon was well advanced, because he was too young to have acquired that art of creating a pause which

very few people acquire before middle age, and in his clumsy efforts to emancipate himself he only succeeded in snubbing everybody.

When at length he had taken his leave, the eldest Miss Dare remarked:—

"That young man has far too high an opinion of himself."

It was to her brother that she expressed this opinion, and probably she had reason for believing that it would not be unwelcome to him, since she had led him out into the garden to deliver it.

But Bobby answered disconsolately, "Oh, I don't know. I shouldn't call him a conceited fellow; and even if he is, he has some right to be."

"Bobby," said Miss Dare, impressively, "you are an utter goose. Nobody who is worth anything is conceited; but of course if you will persist in asserting that Archie Bligh is your superior (which he isn't), you will be believed, because it will naturally be supposed that you ought to know. If I were you I should be ashamed of having so little pluck."

"My dear Jane, what on earth do you mean?" inquired Bobby, with round eyes of astonishment.

"I mean," answered Miss Dare, composedly, "that everybody knows you are in love with Cicely Bligh, and that I know you are quite good enough for her, and that you will never have the slightest chance of getting what you want unless you are bold enough to declare yourself. Girls don't, as a rule, fall in love with their cousins—and I'm sure there's nothing so desperately fascinating about Archie!—but girls will sometimes marry against their own inclinations to please their

fathers. Especially when other people are too stupid or too modest to come forward."

Bobby was much surprised. He had been under the impression that his secret had been most carefully kept; but he was not altogether sorry that his sister, upon whose insight he placed great reliance, had divined it. "The truth is," said he, presently, "that I've no business to ask any girl to marry me. I haven't got any coin, you see."

"But she has—or will have."

"That's just it. Putting everything else aside, wouldn't she think it great cheek of a pauper like me to propose to an heiress?"

"No, she wouldn't. She is not an idiot; and if it is any comfort to you to know that she can read you like a book, you may safely lay that comfort to your soul. Only she will be very apt to despise you if you despise yourself."

Poor Bobby heaved a deep sigh and formed a bold resolution. He was not very sanguine, but, after all, his sister might be right, and could hardly be very far wrong. If one is to be rejected, one may as well be rejected in plain terms as by implication.

CHAPTER XII.

LADY DARE'S BALL.

It is the nature of mankind, and perhaps (though one must not venture to affirm this too positively) it is even more the nature of womankind, to desire what seems to be difficult of attainment, and to despise every-

thing that has either been already attained or may be attained without much exertion. That, at all events, seems the most plausible explanation of the fact that Cicely Bligh patronised her cousin Archie, and snubbed Bobby Dare, both of whom were very nice young men indeed, whilst she took an almost respectful interest in Mark Chetwode, who was past his first youth, who had never been handsome, and who took very little trouble to please her. Mark, as has been mentioned, had dined at the Priory, and it may be added that he had produced a generally favourable impression there. Mr. Bligh had found him clever and exceptionally well-informed upon questions of European politics. Miss Skipwith had been much gratified by his courteous and deferential address, and Morton had liked him as much as he could like anybody except himself—which, to be sure, is not making a strong positive statement, yet must be accounted as strong in a comparative sense. But to Cicely he had scarcely spoken at all; and this naturally interested her, because she could not comprehend why he should be so odd and so very unlike other people.

While Archie was spending a long and weary afternoon with the Dare family, as narrated in the last chapter, Cicely was discussing this abnormal stranger with Mrs. Lowndes; and Mrs. Lowndes, a lean, busy little woman, with iron-grey hair, who had no children, and whose intimate acquaintance with the affairs of everyone who dwelt within ten miles of her was proverbial, said:—

"My dear, you may depend upon it there is some entanglement. As soon as I had seen the man I said

to Robert, 'There is some entanglement.' He has a sort of hopeless look which tells its own tale as plainly as possible. Besides, why is he burying himself down here? Not because he cares a fig for his property or his tenants or his neighbours, you may be sure. The whole time that I was talking to him about them he kept swallowing yawns until his eyes began to water. No! there is a mystery in the case; and if it were not wrong to bet, I would bet you a shilling to sixpence that a woman is at the bottom of it."

Sharp little Mrs. Lowndes was, as we know, both right and wrong. Cicely had no means of verifying the more experienced lady's diagnosis, but it is needless to say that, after that, she was more than ever determined to get at the truth. Mr. Chetwode and his entanglements might not concern her particularly, yet it was intolerable that he should continue to be mysterious. When one holds triumphant sway over the entire countryside one really cannot suffer mysteries to remain unexplained.

And so, when certain parochial matters had been talked over, and Cicely had set out homewards, her thoughts were a good deal occupied with Mr. Chetwode. She was not at all surprised to find Archie loitering at the corner of one of the lanes, nor was she taken in for a moment by his clumsy affectation of a start.

"Do you mean to tell me that you have only just got away from the Rectory?" he asked. "What *can* you have been doing all this time?"

"Have I been a long time? I did not know it was long," returned Cicely. "Mrs. Lowndes and I always

have plenty to do when we meet. And how have you been occupying yourself during my absence?"

"Oh, I've been lunching out, too," answered Archie, rather dismally. "I didn't want to be left to the tender mercies of Morton if I could help it, so, as I happened to come across Bobby Dare, and as he asked me to go and lunch at Instowe, I thought I had better accept. It was deadly dull. They are deadly dull people, and they wouldn't talk about anything except that ball of theirs—which will be deadly dull too, I expect."

"Oh, they have made you promise to go to it then?"

"I don't think I exactly promised; but if I did I can have a sick headache when the time comes. And I certainly will unless you go. Why can't you go?"

"Well, I told you, you know. I can't be sure that Papa will be well enough to be left."

"Oh, but that's only an excuse. Of course you can go if you want to go."

"But why should I want to go? You yourself say that it will be deadly dull, and what inducement have you to offer me beyond that of a waltz or two with you?—and you know, my dear Archie, that unless you have improved very much you are not quite a first-rate dancer."

"I have improved very much," Archie declared. "Moreover, you will have Bobby to dance with, if that's an inducement. Chetwode too, I believe, for they said they must ask him. Would Chetwode be an inducement?"

"An immense one," answered Cicely decisively. "If he accepts the invitation I will certainly make an effort to do likewise. I can see you and Bobby any

day, but it isn't so easy to see Mr. Chetwode, or to get him to talk when one does see him."

Archie grunted.

"I don't know why you should be so anxious to make him talk," he remarked.

"You would know if you had tried and failed. Perhaps he may have nothing to say; but one would like to make sure of that before giving him up. I wonder whether Morton will go. Did they say anything about asking him?"

"Well—yes, they did," Archie replied, with some hesitation.

"Only they had doubts as to the propriety of introducing him to their friends, I suppose. They are wrong, I think. Some day or other he will be Lord of Abbotsport Manor, and then they will be obliged to know him. They ought to send him a card—especially as he is almost sure to refuse."

But when this question was spoken of during dinner, it transpired that Morton took no such ungenerous view of his duty to his neighbours. He said he would certainly show himself at the ball, and did not even seem to think that there was any occasion for him to wait until he was asked. Further, he was clearly of opinion that Mark ought to be there, and must be taken there by main force if necessary.

"London is one thing," he was good enough to explain, "and Abbotsport is another. One can't decline civilities here without giving a good and sufficient reason. It's one of the first duties of a man who is trying to become a country gentleman to submit to social nuisances and look pleasant."

"Are you trying to become a country gentleman, Morton?" inquired his father, with an air of faintly amused curiosity.

"I've no choice in the matter," replied the heir-apparent calmly; "that is what I'm bound to be, and I must make up my mind to it. Chetwode isn't situated quite as I am, and I daresay he may be inclined to shirk his burdens. But he mustn't be allowed to shirk them; we'll offer him a lift over to Instowe. He has no trap of his own, I believe."

"Only, as you mean to join us, we shall be four without him," remarked Archie.

"Well," said Morton, composedly, "we can divide ourselves into two carriage loads. In fact we ought to do so, for I am sure Aunt Susan would be grieved beyond measure if her ball-dress were crushed. You and the two ladies can take the landau, and I'll drive Chetwode over in the brougham. I suppose the stables do contain an animal who is quiet enough to go in single harness without scaring a nervous man out of his wits?"

Mr. Bligh having intimated that such was probably the case, the subject dropped, and before the date fixed for the ball Morton was at the pains of walking over a second time to Upton Chetwode and bringing a certain amount of pressure to bear upon one whose inclinations appeared to tend towards seclusion. Mark said he didn't think he would derive much amusement from provincial gaieties, but yielded gracefully when he was informed that it was Miss Bligh's particular wish that he should respond to such advances as his neighbours were able to make to him.

"Cicely went the length of saying that she herself would not put in an appearance unless you did," Morton averred. "She's tremendously in earnest about it; and upon my word I believe she's right. It doesn't do to make oneself unpopular. Just look at me, for instance. I expect I hate balls a good deal more than you do, and no one has paid me such a compliment as to say that she would go to Instowe for the pleasure of meeting me; but I shall be there just the same."

In presence of so bright an example Mark could no longer hesitate. He signified his willingness to do all that might be required of him, and accepted with thanks Morton's kind offer of a seat in Mr. Bligh's brougham; and after his visitor had left him he laughed unrestrainedly for several minutes. All this was certainly a little comical. Morton's designs were simple and explicable enough; but what in the world did a young and beautiful heiress mean by throwing herself at his head? During the whole of his career, which, in a social sense, had been tolerably eventful, he had had no such experience; and not unnaturally Cicely sank in his estimation by reason of her supposed importunity. He was, of course, willing enough to marry her, if it came to that, but he was not sure that it would not be a great bore to have to make love to her. His sentiments, in short, were precisely what those of the writer and reader of these words would probably be under similar circumstances; and if the statement of them makes him appear somewhat of a coxcomb, allowance may perhaps be made for him in consideration of his complete misunderstanding of the case. This was, at

any rate, the very last time that any such misconception came within the range of his capacities.

For, although, when the proper time arrived, he duly carried out his share of the compact and was conducted by Morton Bligh to the scene of festivity, Miss Bligh did not see fit to fulfil hers, except in so far as that she was present in the ball-room on his entrance. She seemed quite surprised when he asked her how many dances she could spare him.

"I am very sorry," she answered, "but my card is more than full, and as it is, I shall have to throw a good many people over most likely, because I don't think I can stay till the end. But I shall be very glad to introduce you to partners, if you are in want of them."

Mark smilingly declined and fell back, with a distinct feeling of mortification. He had not expected to be so snubbed, nor did he in the least believe, what was nevertheless perfectly true, that Cicely's programme could have been filled up so early in the evening. To be a beauty in London or Paris, or any other large city, is to be one of a certain number of happy and distinguished persons; but to be the beauty of an English county is very generally to shine supreme and alone, and, since it is human to be gregarious, Cicely's admirers numbered just as many young men as there were in the room. Moreover, it was a matter of almost absolute indifference to her whether she danced with A or B; so she had promised three dances in advance to her cousin, and had willingly accorded as many to

Bobby Dare, who had rushed forward to implore them immediately upon her arrival.

Mark leant against the wall and watched her, after quieting his conscience by walking through a set of Lancers with the eldest Miss Dare. Her frock was very well cut, he noticed—assuredly it was not the handiwork of a provincial dressmaker—and as for her beauty, that was what he had never thought of disputing. Only, somehow or other, it attracted him to-night, which it could scarcely be said to have done heretofore. After her very plain invitation to him, he could only account for her behaviour upon the supposition that she was either capricious or a coquette, and the uncertainty stimulated his curiosity.

In reality she was quite as much disappointed as he was that her engagements did not permit of her dancing with him, and she also thought him rather tiresome for having been so dilatory about presenting himself. But upon further consideration she remembered that the delay was probably rather Morton's fault than his; so that it seemed a little unfair to make him suffer for it. Consulting her programme she found that she had promised the fourteenth dance to Archie and the fifteenth to Bobby; and, with that unscrupulousness which all women, unhappily, are wont to exhibit in their dealings with those whom they have brought into subjection, she determined to ask each of them to let her off. She used no deception in the matter: she told them both candidly that she wished to dance with Mr. Chetwode, and that she relied upon their good-nature to enable her to do as she wished. And having been granted the release, which could hardly be refused, she

requested her partner to conduct her to Mr. Chetwode, whom she informed that, after all, she could manage to give him numbers fourteen and fifteen, if he cared to have them.

"You are very kind," he replied, with that deferential, un-English bow of his. "I was thinking of going away; but now I shall most thankfully remain. I only wish I could flatter myself that, as a partner, I should prove worthy of you."

He danced, as many Russians do, after the German fashion—that is to say, admirably in respect of time and smoothness, yet with a manner of holding himself and his partner which was a little uncomfortable to a lady who had never been out of England. Perhaps it was because she did not get on with him quite as well as she had expected, perhaps it was (as she alleged) because the evening was far advanced and she was tired out, but more probably it was because she desired to test his conversational rather than his waltzing powers that Cicely proposed to sit out the remainder of the time at her disposal. At all events, she obtained his assent, of which she lost no time in taking advantage. Hitherto, this man had baffled her; and to be baffled was an altogether novel experience for Miss Bligh. She put forth all her powers, which were very great (is not the power of any young and beautiful woman enormous?), to break down the barrier of his polite reserve, and it need scarcely be said that she was successful. She made him talk about himself; she led him on to speak of subjects which he was not in the habit of discussing; she did not, it is true, hear anything about Madame Souravieff—because one must draw the line somewhere

—but she learnt that Mr. Chetwode was a weary and unhappy man, that he had lost all his illusions and did not know where to find fresh ones; also that sympathy was very pleasant and very welcome to him.

And he, for his part, was perfectly sincere. He not only seemed to be fascinated, but really was fascinated. Being no fool, he very soon perceived that Cicely was neither in love with him nor anxious to make him fall in love with her. He had never met a woman at all like her before—had never, indeed, had the chance of so doing—and her combination of audacity and innocence touched some chord or other in his heart which through the whole of his previous life had remained intact. It was with quite spontaneous honesty that he paid her a very pretty compliment at length.

"You understand a great deal," he said. "How is it that you have come to understand so much without ever leaving Abbotsport?"

"What is the difference between Abbotsport and other places?" she asked, laughing.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose you are right; it is always the same story over and over again; only sometimes it is printed in big type and sometimes in small. Still one does not meet every day with a person whose eyes are clear enough to read the small type. And is that enough for you? Will you have philosophy enough to live always contentedly in a microcosm?"

"If that were to be my fate I don't think I should complain of it," answered Cicely; "but it is not at all likely to be my fate."

"Doesn't one's fate very much depend upon oneself?"

"Yours may, and I daresay it does; but mine will be settled for me by other people. Here comes Bobby, looking very sad and reproachful; I must go and dance with him, poor boy! And you can go home to bed, as I see that you are dying to do. Take the brougham, if you want it; we will make room for Morton, and put Archie up on the box."

But Mark, instead of going home, remained where he was for a time, and watched her while she danced. "It is not going to be such a simple affair after all," he thought to himself. Indeed, there were several reasons why the line of action upon which he had resolved seemed less easy to carry out than it had at first appeared. To begin with, he had discovered that Miss Bligh's intelligence was above the average; then he suspected that although, like most women, she coveted admiration, her head was not likely to be turned by it; finally—and this was most serious of all—his own head was no longer as cool as he could have wished it to be. He was conscious of certain once-familiar sensations, from the recurrence of which he had believed himself to be permanently delivered; he was conscious, too, of a decided loss of self-confidence and increase of anxiety. "No, it isn't going to be simple," he repeated, as he rose and made for the door. "However, that will, at least, make it more interesting."

CHAPTER XIII.

BOBBY IS PUT OUT OF SUSPENSE.

While Cicely was producing the impression above mentioned upon Mark Chetwode, while Archie from a

distant point of vantage was glaring at the unconscious couple, and while the remainder of the assembled company were, it may be hoped, enjoying themselves after their several fashions, Bobby Dare was in a condition of tumultuous mental excitement. That very evening—so he had determined—he was to hear whether life thenceforth should mean for him a hopeful effort towards some realisable ideal or merely a daily round of monotonous duty. Either way, he was going to be relieved from suspense, which is always a stirring prospect. His sister Jane had patted him on the back and encouraged him very much, but that is what one's sister Jane may generally be relied upon to do; and if one be a sensible man, like Bobby, one makes allowance for her partiality while duly appreciating it, and is not specially elated by her sanguine anticipations. Bobby was very far from being sanguine, yet he was glad, as every brave man ought to be, that the time for decisive action had arrived; and so, after he had danced with Cicely for a minute or two, he asked her whether she would mind coming with him into the library. "Because," said he, "I want to tell you something."

"I shall be delighted," she answered unhesitatingly. "I have had more than enough dancing for one night, and if you can tell me anything of a nature to amuse or interest me I shall be truly grateful."

The library was deserted, and in the way of illumination had but two shaded lamps (a concession to modern social requirements which Lady Dare had only sanctioned after a struggle), the bay-windows had been thrown open, and beside one of them was an arm-chair, of which Cicely promptly took possession.

"Well," said she, as soon as Bobby had seated himself, with his elbows on his knees, upon an old-fashioned stool in front of her, "speak on. I am accustomed to receiving confidences; nobody gets more of them than I do, and if I were not so discreet, I could tell you all the domestic secrets of Abbotsport. What is your particular trouble? Have you been falling desperately in love with somebody, after the manner of sailors? And has she snubbed you?"

Perhaps this was rather a cruel speech; but then it must be apparent to everybody that there are occasions upon which one is cruel only to be kind. Bobby neither took the hint nor resented it.

"First of all," he answered, "I wanted to tell you that I've been appointed to the *Cygnet,* and that I shall have to join in a few days."

"It is very ignorant of me, but I really don't know whether I ought to congratulate you or not. Where is the *Cygnet?* And what is she going to do?"

"Oh, it's a matter for congratulation, I think. I shall be on the East Indian station—in the Persian Gulf or the Red Sea, most likely—and one might be worse off than that. There's always the chance of active service in putting down the slave trade, you see. But what I have made up my mind to say to you to-night—because I'm sure it's better to say it and have done with it—is that whatever happens to me in the future will be good or bad or indifferent, just as you may decide."

Cicely assumed an air of astonishment which she did not feel.

"I don't understand how that can be," she declared.

"But of course you do understand," returned Bobby, who was a very straightforward young man. "You understand quite well, Cicely, that I love you, and that I have never loved anyone but you. I haven't said so before, but you knew it without my saying so: and now I want you to tell me honestly whether it's an altogether hopeless business or not. I can do with a very little bit of hope," he added modestly, "if you can give it me."

Cicely burst out laughing. Her laughter might have struck a dispassionate observer as being a trifle forced, but it would have been most unreasonable to expect of a matter-of-fact and amorous young sailor that he should be in a position to make dispassionate observations.

"My dear Bobby," she exclaimed, "you are very flattering, but you are a little bit absurd, you know. Didn't I tell you you were in love with somebody? Well, by this time next year you will be in love with somebody else, that's all. And then, if there's any gratitude in you, you will be thankful to me, I hope, for not having taken you too seriously."

"That isn't a fair way to answer me, Cicely. You may refuse me, and I suppose you will; but you aren't heartless enough to laugh at me, and you needn't pretend that you are. I know you better than that."

Cicely was a little surprised, and showed she was so by a change in her voice.

"But, Bobby," she remonstrated, "how would you have me answer you? You are only a boy."

"So you say; still the fact remains that I am a man. If you tell me that you don't care for me, and never can care for me, there's an end of it; only I'm

sure you can't think me absurd. It wasn't absurd to love you. It may be presumptuous perhaps; that I quite admit."

If he had been as clever as he was stupid, and as designing as he was honest, he could not have put the case more effectively; for he touched Cicely's heart and made her feel ashamed of herself. Nevertheless, she shook her head.

"I am very sorry, Bobby," she said, "but you mustn't think about it any more. I hope you won't think about it any more—or, at any rate, not for long. You oughtn't to call me heartless because I can't help remembering how young you are. You haven't seen a great many women yet, have you? And just think what a dreadful thing it would be to be bound to one, and then to find that there was another whom you liked better."

"I daresay it would be dreadful if it were possible," answered Bobby; "only in my case it isn't possible. However, I suppose you mean me to understand that there's no chance for me?"

Cicely, by silence, signified assent. The moon, which was nearly at the full, shone in through the open window, and fell upon the features of the handsome, dejected-looking young fellow who sat facing her. She had never meant to flirt with him; she had never meant to give a moment of pain to his honest heart. Certainly she had known he was an admirer of hers; but then so many people were admirers of hers! Yet, while she looked at him, her conscience pricked her, and at length she said:—

"I haven't—I hope you don't think I have—encouraged you, Bobby?"

"Oh, no," he replied, with a dreary little laugh; "you cannot be accused of having done that. Only there seemed to be just the least shadow of a hope, and as I am going away for such a long time I thought I would rather hear the truth before I started; and then Jane kept on telling me that I should never get what I wanted if I hadn't the pluck to ask for it—which was sensible enough, I daresay."

The counsels of Jane were no doubt sensible in the abstract, but it was scarcely sensible to quote them to Cicely, whose manner at once underwent a slight change.

"Oh," said she, "you have been making a *confidante* of Jane, then?"

In truth there was no great love lost between her and Miss Dare, who was strong-minded and managing, and whom she suspected (with perfect justice) of being desirous that her brother should marry a rich woman.

"I didn't exactly confide in her," answered Bobby. "She guessed what was the matter with me, and when she taxed me with it in plain terms I couldn't contradict her. So then she urged me not to put off speaking until it might be too late."

"Your sister," observed Cicely, "doesn't seem to give me credit for knowing my own mind. Did she think that it was a question of who might happen to speak first?"

"No, only she thought—— But perhaps you will be offended if I tell you what she thought."

"Perhaps I shall," answered Cicely; "but I wish to hear it, all the same. Go on."

And so accustomed was Bobby to obey this im-

perious young lady that he did not venture to dispute her pleasure.

"Well," he began, "I was afraid—of course I don't know whether I am right or wrong, and I mustn't ask —but for some time past I have been very much afraid of Archie. Jealous of him in short, if I must speak the plain truth."

"Yes," said Cicely, with an unmoved countenance, for indeed this was no news to her.

Bobby looked wistfully at her for a moment, and then resumed:—

"Naturally I can't help knowing that Archie is a cut above me in almost everything, except, perhaps, in sailing a boat; but Jane, you see——"

"Jane, quite as naturally, has a less humble opinion of you. So far, I am entirely with Jane. Well?"

"Well, she wouldn't allow that, on our merits, there was much difference between us; but she has an idea that your father wants you to marry Archie, and that you may do it in order to please him. I've been thinking a good deal about it since," continued Bobby, as the girl remained silent, "and it seems to me that it really is a danger. A danger for you, I mean; as for me, no doubt I shouldn't have been any better off if Archie had never been born."

And, with a certain unstudied eloquence which was not ineffective, he proceeded to expatiate upon the fatal consequences which must necessarily result from a marriage of convenience. He declared—and his face proved his sincerity—that he cared far more for her happiness than for his own, that he could very well

to hear that she had married a man whom she

loved, and that he had always known that he himself could hardly win her love by anything short of a miracle; but to hear that from motives of expediency she had married a man whom she did not really love would, he confessed, be to him the very worst news possible, and he implored her not to sacrifice herself in so useless a way.

Cicely's response to his appeal was scarcely satisfactory to him.

"Perhaps," said she, "the simplest plan is not to marry at all. I don't think I have ever met anybody except my father whom I should care to live with always; and you are completely mistaken if you imagine that he wishes me to marry against my will."

"Perhaps he doesn't," answered Bobby, doubtfully, "but everybody seems to think that he has set his heart upon your marrying Archie. And small blame to him if he has! Although I do trust you won't oblige him, unless—unless——"

Cicely shut up her fan with a sudden impatient rattle.

"Oh, the chances are that I shall live and die an old maid," she said. "No doubt there are plenty of women who can manage to think their husbands paragons of perfection, but I can't believe myself capable of such imbecility, and if one didn't think the man a paragon, I don't see how one could escape abhorring him. The whole question is one of imagination from beginning to end, and my imagination has always been defective."

That was probably true; and it was certainly true that she was as yet fancy free. If anyone had contrived to find a soft place in her heart, that person

was no other than the modest Bobby himself; but of course such an avowal could not be made without a risk of misconception.

And now this interview was brought to an abrupt close by the entrance of Archie, who marched up to the couple in a state of ill-disguised irritation, to say that he had been looking for them all over the place, that the carriage was at the door and that everybody was going away.

"Chetwode appears to have appropriated the brougham," he added. "Pretty cool of him, I must say. We shall have to stow Morton away somehow."

He was not much mollified when his cousin rejoined:—

"That is my fault; I told Mr. Chetwode he could have the brougham. The carriage holds four, but anyhow you won't mind sitting on the box on such a lovely night, will you? I thought you would be glad to have the chance of a cigar."

Archie grunted; and while Cicely, who had risen, was making her way towards the ball-room, to say goodnight to her entertainers, he muttered to Bobby:—

"That brute has been swilling champagne the whole evening. If we could have got away a little sooner, there might have been some hope of his being able to behave himself; but by this time he must be as drunk as an owl. I'd put him on the box, only I suppose he'd roll off."

Morton was subsequently offered the box-seat, which he declined, with thanks. He was not drunk, but he might without much exaggeration have been called tipsy. He was also in high spirits; for he had wit-

nessed from a distance his sister's prolonged conversation with Mark Chetwode, and Archie's evident ill-humour struck him in the light of a capital joke. He beguiled the homeward way with some facetious sallies at the expense of Lady Dare's guests, most of which were expressed in language which shocked Miss Skipwith beyond measure, and consequently amused Cicely. The latter was in need of any amusement that she could obtain, because her own spirits were somewhat depressed. She had an uncomfortable feeling that she had not behaved very well to poor Bobby, and a still more uncomfortable feeling that he had behaved with a good deal of magnanimity to her; she could have wished also to explain to him—had it seemed possible to do that without exciting false hopes —that she was not and never had been in love with any man, and that she believed herself to be constitutionally incapable of such emotions. But there are things which it is always extremely difficult to say, because nobody will ever believe them; so that perhaps it was just as well for Bobby's peace of mind that his entreaties had been met by an uncompromising negative. After all he was very young, and the wounds of young people heal quickly.

Meanwhile Morton, encouraged by his aunt's deprecatory murmurs and his sister's laughter, was not mincing matters. Not a good word had he to say for a single person whom he had met that evening, except Mark Chetwode, whom he boldly averred to be the only civilized human being in the entire countryside.

"Chetwode is a gentleman," said he. "Clever fellow too—uncommonly clever fellow. Not much use

for the Miss Dares to set their caps at him, I can tell them!"

"Perhaps they won't," observed Cicely. "He isn't such a very great catch, you see."

"My dear girl," returned her brother, with much solemnity, "a man like Chetwode would be a catch if he hadn't a brass farthing in the world. You may take my word for that. He'll get into Parliament and distinguish himself, you'll see; he won't be content to vegetate down here all his life. I should say," continued Morton, with as much gravity and deliberation as if he had known what he was talking about, "that with a little capital—of course a little capital is necessary to start with—Chetwode might rise to almost any position."

And it is highly probable that he would have proceeded to hint in plain terms at the quarter whence the requisite capital might appropriately be derived, had he not been preserved from wrecking his schemes in that way by the termination of the drive.

CHAPTER XIV.

MR. BLIGH STATES HIS INTENTIONS.

One fine morning, not long after the ball at which he had entertained his friends and acquaintances, Sir George Dare mounted his old bay horse, and lost a button off the back of his trousers in the process. This, coming on the top of other vexatious incidents, saddened him and brought gloomy ideas into his mind; so

that he shook his head very mournfully as he jogged down the drive.

"It comes to this," he sighed, "that I must either give up wearing braces altogether, or have the library steps brought out every time that I want to get upon a horse's back. A pretty state of things for a man of my age, who has always led an abstemious life!"

As, however, his temperament was optimistic, and as exercise and fresh air always did him good, he presently became more cheerful, remembering that, after all, he might be a great deal worse off. There was poor Bligh, for instance, to whom he was about to pay a neighbourly visit—Bligh, who was his junior by a long way and was a helpless cripple, simply waiting for death.

"Waiting for death," soliloquised Sir George, "that's all that can be said about him; and with no prospect of dying comfortably either; for it must be deuced unpleasant to have such a rascal of a son, and see him standing there ready to step into your shoes. Thank God, I've no cause to be ashamed of any son of mine—though I wish one of 'em wasn't such a stoopid young ass!"

Sir George, who was fond of Bobby and proud of him, would have turned purple with anger if anybody else had ventured so to describe the Benjamin of the family; but it certainly was tiresome of the boy to have abortive love affairs and bolt off to London on some flimsy pretext before his leave had expired. Bobby had departed, and the flimsy pretext alluded to had been outwardly acquiesced in; but the mishap which had befallen him was no secret to any of his near

relations, because he had been unable to conceal it from Jane, and Jane had imparted it to her mother, who had told Sir George, and reticence had never been one of Sir George's many fine qualities. Not that he meant to say a word about the matter to Bligh; that would be a very useless and undignified thing to do. Girls must be allowed to choose their own husbands, or at any rate to reject aspirants whom they may have the bad taste not to fancy, and Lady Dare was much mistaken in thinking that Cicely was the sort of girl who would submit to have a husband chosen for her.

As a matter of fact, Lady Dare did not think so; but Jane did. Jane was convinced that unless some disinterested person intervened Cicely would be talked into marrying her cousin, and Jane's conviction, which had reached her father's ear, may have had something to do with that honest gentleman's sudden anxiety to inform himself as to the state of poor Bligh's health. But if so he was quite unconscious of it. He had told Lady Dare, who had suggested the intervention of the disinterested person, that that was all stuff and nonsense, and although he had agreed with her that it would be very nice if Bobby were to make a good marriage, and had not disputed her assertion that Bobby was both handsomer and more lovable than Archie, he had at the same time reminded her that Cicely appeared to be of a different opinion.

On reaching the Priory he was informed that Mr. Bligh was out in the garden, and there, reclining in a sheltered, sunny spot, he found the invalid, whom he greeted with much heartiness.

"Well, Bligh," said he, "it's a great pleasure to see

you out of doors again, I'm sure! And how are you? Progressing, I hope—progressing, eh?"

"Oh, I'm progressing," answered Mr. Bligh, with a little laugh. "In fact I may say that I'm progressing very fast indeed—down the hill."

Sir George began to say:—"Oh, nonsense, my dear fellow, you mustn't talk like that! You're all right; we shall have you about again before long." But while he was speaking he looked at the other's pale, waxen face, and suddenly felt ashamed of uttering such absurdities; so that his sentence, which had started so bravely, died away feebly before reaching its conclusion.

To relieve his embarrassment Mr. Bligh at once changed the subject, and presently made some inquiry about Bobby, which enabled Sir George to say:—

"Ah, poor boy, I'm here partly on his behalf. Asked me to say good-bye to you all for him. He has been ordered off to the East India Station, you know."

"So Cicely told me," observed Mr. Bligh; "but I didn't know that he had to join his ship immediately."

"He won't have to join for a week or two, I believe; but he said he must go up to London to get his outfit. The fact of the matter is that he wanted to get away—and no fool he! *I* didn't attempt to detain him, though of course his mother was distressed."

Sir George glanced at Mr. Bligh and saw that his meaning had been understood. He did not, however, obtain much comfort or encouragement from the latter, who only smiled and remarked:

"He is one of a tolerably large number. Happily for him he is a sailor, and sailors have short memories."

"I don't know so much about that," returned Sir

George, rather grumpily; "we Dares aren't weather-cocks, whatever we may be. At the same time, I am quite aware—and so I told his mother—that you have other intentions. No doubt it's just as well that he should get away, poor fellow! How long do you expect your son to stay with you?"

"He hasn't spoken to me about his plans," Mr Bligh answered, "but I should think that, under the circumstances, he would see the propriety of being in at the death. It's customary, you know; and I have been much impressed of late by Morton's earnest desire to do what is customary."

Sir George suddenly broke out into strong language. As a matter of principle, no one was more firmly convinced than he that it is both wrong and unlike a gentleman to swear; but surely it is justifiable to resort to any remedy in order to secure yourself against a fit of apoplexy, and his good friend Bligh had the knack of exasperating him beyond endurance. His observations were somewhat incoherent, but the upshot of them was that it was downright disgusting; and Mr. Bligh agreed meditatively that perhaps it was rather disgusting, when you came to think of it. The situation, however, was not of his creating, and he was at a loss to understand why he was being scolded.

Sir George said:—

"Nobody is scolding you, Bligh; but if you don't want to make a man lose his temper—I believe that's just what you do want, though—you shouldn't talk in such an unnatural way."

"I thought I was suiting myself to my subject," answered Mr. Bligh, mildly. "For the matter of that,

nothing that happens is unnatural. Otherwise it couldn't happen, you see."

This puzzled Sir George, who rubbed the back of his head and endeavoured to argue the point. Thus he was led away into an irrelevant discussion, and had not yet ascertained whether the Abbotsport property was really to pass into the hands of the obnoxious Morton or not when the colloquy was interrupted by Archie's appearance upon the scene.

That young man, who strolled up with his hands in his pockets, looked as if he didn't know what to do with himself—which indeed was his case. He said disconsolately that Cicely had gone off somewhere to visit the poor, as usual, and that Morton was asleep in the smoking-room—also as usual. After which he sat down upon the ground and heaved a profound sigh. Sir George chatted for a few minutes longer, and then took his leave, saying:—

"Well, I ought to be going home or I shall be late for luncheon. Very glad to have seen you, Bligh, and —and—I hope you'll be better soon. And you must keep up your spirits, you know—you must keep up your spirits!"

"He's a good old fellow, that," remarked Archie, when the worthy baronet was out of hearing. "Did he come over here just to ask how you were?"

"He is a very good old fellow," replied Mr. Bligh, "although I don't think he came over solely for that purpose. I believe that one of his reasons for coming was that he—or possibly Lady Dare—is very anxious to know whether I mean my son to inherit this place."

"What business is that of theirs?"

"It is to some extent their business. One can't be altogether independent of one's neighbours, and there is a certain kind of neighbour who can give one a good deal of annoyance if he chooses. However, I didn't tell Sir George what my intentions were. But I think," added Mr. Bligh, after a short pause, "that I will tell *you*, if you don't mind listening to me for a minute or two. Now that my mind is made up, I should like you to know it. Did it ever occur to you that I might put you in Morton's place?"

"No," answered the young man, looking up wonderingly, "I can't say that it ever did."

"I'm glad of that; because I don't mean to commit such an act of injustice, much as I should like to commit it. If I felt free to consult my own inclinations, I should choose to be succeeded by somebody who would be content to lead the ordinary life of an English country gentleman. I have been interested in my tenants and in the fishing people, and I have tried to do what I could for them, and the idea that my work will be either undone or allowed to die a natural death isn't, of course, quite pleasant to me. Still I couldn't deprive Morton of his birthright. After thinking it over, that is the conclusion to which I have come. The excuse, it seems to me, would be insufficient, and I need not weary you by going into reasons and particulars. But I have thought myself justified in leaving him only a life interest in the estates, which will pass on his death to his eldest son, or, if he never has any sons, to Cicely. For you I have made such provision as it seemed right and reasonable to make. You won't

be a rich man, Archie, but you will be independent—which, after all, means much the same thing."

Archie made the unintelligible mumble which is all that can be expected of a man to whom an announcement of that kind has been made, and a pause ensued. Then Mr. Bligh, who had been scrutinizing the young man with a faintly amused air, resumed:

"I wonder whether you would mind my speaking to you with brutal and unceremonious frankness?"

Archie raised his blue eyes wonderingly and answered:—

"I don't mind your saying anything that you want to say, Uncle Wilfrid."

"Thank you. Well, I want to say something that may perhaps make you blush; but I will look the other way while I'm saying it. You must try to forgive an unemployed cripple for having had eyes sharp enough to perceive that you are smitten with my daughter, and maybe you will forgive me the more easily when I tell you that it has given me the greatest possible satisfaction to perceive that such is the case. If I had to choose a husband for her out of the whole world, I should choose you; and—in short, my dear fellow, I wish you good luck with all my heart."

Here Mr. Bligh held out his hand to his nephew, who took it, expressing his gratitude as warmly as a somewhat limited vocabulary would allow. He thought his uncle was treating him with very great kindness and generosity, and he said as much.

"Well, no," answered the elder man, laughing, "I'm afraid I can't claim much credit for either. You have all the personal qualities that one is entitled to ask for

in a son-in-law, but in addition to that, circumstances give you a special value in my eyes. I suppose feeling one's end so near makes one a little wanting in delicacy and inclined to say things which, as a general rule, are only hinted at, but as I have begun by being so candid, I may as well go on. Looking to the future, I can't but be aware that Morton is not likely to marry, and that his life is not likely to be a long one. Consequently I foresee that some day my place will be taken by Cicely's husband, and it would be a comfort to me to know that Cicely's husband will be one of my own blood. I only mention this by way of explaining myself; your own good sense will tell you that it would be a very great mistake for you to count upon chances, or even upon probabilities. I trust I haven't shocked you by my cold-bloodedness."

It is not impossible that Archie might have been just the least bit in the world shocked, had he been in a calmer condition of mind; but as it was, he was too excited and anxious for criticism, and what he chiefly wanted to know was whether he could at once declare himself to Cicely with any prospect of success.

"Really," said his uncle, laughing, "you ought to be a better judge of that than I. I can't, of course, do anything to help you; all I can say is that you have my best wishes."

This was, no doubt, the proper attitude to take up, and, whatever may be thought of Mr. Bligh's discretion, it cannot be said that up to that point he had used any undue influence for the furtherance of his schemes. But later in the day he did, though without intending it, transgress to some extent the limits of strict neu-

trality. Cicely—as indeed was a common enough practice with her—did not put in an appearance at luncheon, but at five o'clock she found her father in the library and seated herself by his side to pour out his tea for him; and then it was that she heard the news of Bobby's precipitate departure, which seemed both to distress and anger her.

"He might at least have taken the trouble to come and say good-bye to us," she remarked.

"Taking everything into consideration," answered Mr. Bligh, with a smile, "perhaps some allowance may be made for his bad manners."

"Oh, you know, then?"

"Well, I can guess. Sir George didn't leave a great deal to my imagination, though we avoided particulars. From your guilty expression, I presume that the poor youth must have gone the length of putting a plain question and getting a plain answer."

Cicely nodded, rather sadly. She was not much given to confidences, but she had never had any secrets from her father, and she was the more willing now to tell him what occurred because her conscience was ill at ease. Did he, she asked, consider that she had behaved badly? Had she been to blame? Did he think that Bobby was very angry with her?

"It seems so horrid and cruel to have sent him away like this before his time; and I am afraid his people will hate me for it," she said penitently.

Mr. Bligh, however, could not be brought to view this matter in a serious light. He was one of the most kind-hearted men in the world, but he had forgotten, or perhaps had never known, the sufferings attendant

upon unrequited love, and he did not think it probable that a healthy young sailor would find much difficulty in forgetting the girl he had left behind him. These unromantic sentiments he imparted to Cicely, and was amused to notice that if they reassured her they did not altogether please her. Women may always be trusted to think kindly of a disconsolate lover; but, whatever they may say, they can't readily pardon a lover who has found consolation.

And it may be that her father's philosophical remarks produced a certain effect upon Cicely, which, to do him justice, he had not meant to produce; for when, as seemed but natural after such a conversation, he went on to speak of other admirers of hers, and mentioned one in particular whom, if he were in her place, he should rate more highly than all the rest put together, she only shrugged her shoulders and said:—

"Oh, he is very nice and I like him very much, I daresay he would do as well as anybody, if there must be somebody. But must there be somebody?"

"No," answered Mr. Bligh; "but I hope there will be somebody. You don't like me to say I shan't be here much longer; yet that is what I am always thinking of, and I am quite sure I should have a better chance of living for another year or so if I were easy in my mind about you."

In saying this he unquestionably went further than he ought to have done; but he conceived himself to be merely stating a fact. Nothing could have been less in accordance with his desires than that his life should be prolonged by his daughter's marriage with a man whom she did not love. His own impression was that

she really did love Archie, but that she probably was not as yet aware of it. It had always been so much a matter of course that every young man who came near her should prostrate himself before her. So that there seemed to be no great harm in saying what an honest, manly young fellow Archie was, and how straight he had always kept, although his regiment had the name of being a fast one, and what a good sportsman he had shown himself, and how well he seemed to be adapted for country life.

"I was telling him this morning," continued Mr. Bligh with a sigh, "that I would very much rather leave the Priory to him than to Morton, who will hate the place. But that can't be."

"I suppose not," said Cicely, doubtfully.

"Oh, no; it wouldn't do. I hesitated for a time, but my mind is quite made up now. Morton must have the place for life, and the remainder must be to his son, supposing that he ever has a son. Happily, I can leave you a considerable sum of money without pinching him, and I have always intended to provide for Archie. Supposing that things should fall out as they may, you and he, by putting your means together, would have enough to live the sort of life that I should like to think of you as living. I mean that you could have a moderate-sized country house and a sufficiency of horses. Sometimes I have thought that possibly Upton Chetwode might suit you. But these are only a sick man's fancies," concluded Mr. Bligh, laughing. "I amuse myself with fancies, having so little else to do. Occasionally also I torment myself; and in one of my blackest visions I see you established in a London

house, with your Aunt Susan mounting guard over you. Heavens! how wretched you would be!"

Well, at any rate, this man was not selfish. Perhaps he did not know what was most likely to ensure his daughter's happiness: perhaps he did not sufficiently realise that the destiny of every individual on earth is, or ought to be, the property of that individual. All his life he had been accustomed to be a ruler, and in some measure to sway the destinies of a large number of dependents. But of himself he had thought little enough; and this was what struck Cicely, as she rose and looked down upon his somewhat wistful face.

"You are always doing things, or wanting to do things, for other people, Papa," she said. "We must try to show our gratitude by pleasing ourselves, in order to please you."

Then she bent down and kissed him and left the room. There were tears in her eyes, he noticed, and he wondered why. He did not, however, imagine that they were caused by any dread of the future which he had sketched out for her.

CHAPTER XV.

MARK MAKES PEACE.

Her father's avowal of his wishes did not come upon Cicely as any surprise. She had divined them some time back—in truth they had not been very carefully disguised—and although he had not been quite as explicit with her as he had been with Archie, he

might have been so and yet told her little that she did not already understand. Evidently there was something more than a possibility that Morton might die without issue, and just as evidently it must have been necessary to make arrangements for the succession, in that event, of a Bligh worthy of the name. Now there was but one such man in existence besides the present owner of the property; and what could be more natural than that that owner should desire to bring about a match which in time might have the effect of restoring his daughter to the position of authority and beneficence of which his own demise would deprive her? The match, in fact, was undoubtedly a desirable one. Cicely was able to contemplate it without repugnance, if without enthusiasm. She was not in love with Archie, but then she was not in love with anybody else, nor likely to be, and she worshipped her father. Her feeling at the moment was that if, by marrying her cousin, she could relieve her father's mind of anxiety and so prolong his life, she would not hesitate for a moment to make what, after all, could hardly be called a sacrifice. Nobody, at any rate, should suspect that it was a sacrifice. One must do these things with a good grace if one is to do them at all; and why Cicely, who was not given to weeping, should have found it necessary to dry her eyes at frequent intervals for half an hour after coming to this conclusion it would be useless to inquire, since she herself did not know. She supposed that she was crying because she hated so to talk or think about her father's death—which, to be sure, was a plausible reason enough.

When she had dressed for dinner she returned to

the library, where she found an unexpected guest in conversation with her father.

"You will think that I am developing into a very obtrusive neighbour," Mark Chetwode said, as he rose to shake hands with her, "but your brother must bear the blame. He came to see me this afternoon and insisted on bringing me back with him, though I assure you that I defended myself to the best of my power."

"Didn't you want to come, then?" asked Cicely, laughing.

"Ah, that is a question which requires no answer. But I know that in England a man who presents himself at the dinner-hour without an invitation takes a very great liberty. In Russia it is different."

"My dear sir, didn't I invite you?" called out Morton from the arm-chair in which he was lounging at the other end of the room. "Let it be supposed that we are Russians, if that will make you any happier."

"Mr. Chetwode will be good enough to suppose nothing of the kind," returned Cicely. "We are English, and so is he; and if he were anything else he wouldn't be half as welcome as he is, I can tell him."

In point of fact, his presence was particularly welcome to her that evening; because, after what had passed between her and her father, she was conscious of a novel and not very agreeable sensation of embarrassment, which prevented her from talking to Archie with her accustomed freedom. Her father, she was aware, had been making confidential statements to Archie as well as to her, and it was more than probable that he had received confidential statements in return.

Under the circumstances, it was a relief to have to exert oneself for the entertainment of an outsider.

No great exertion, however, was required in order to entertain Mr. Chetwode upon this occasion. It was rather he who exerted himself, and when he chose to exert himself he could be very pleasant company. Without seeming to take any trouble about it (though of course such a thing can't be done without a good deal of trouble), he contrived to draw everybody round the dinner-table into a conversation which he turned hither and thither as he pleased. What was more, he managed to put them all upon pretty good terms with themselves, and consequently with him. Meanwhile he kept his faculties of observation on the alert and made a few trifling discoveries. It did not take him long to detect Archie's subdued excitement and Cicely's some-what forced gaiety, nor was he slow to note the circumstance that Mr. Bligh's eyes kept wandering from his daughter to his nephew and back again. But these things were far from disquieting him. The first act of the little domestic drama was drawing towards a close, he thought, and its conclusion would clear the ground. Obviously the nephew, strongly supported by the uncle, was about to make his proposal; obviously, too, he was about to be rejected: for Mark was convinced that Cicely's affection for her cousin was of a purely cousinly nature: He, for his part, therefore, had at present nothing to do but to bide his time and make himself unobtrusively agreeable.

"My dear," said Miss Skipwith to Cicely, when the two ladies had returned to the drawing-room, a vast apartment which was seldom occupied at any other

hour of the day, "I don't, as you know, pretend to any great insight into character, but it does seem to me that Mr. Chetwode is a most remarkable man."

"Very remarkable," agreed Cicely, who was not thinking about Mr. Chetwode at the moment.

"He has so much more information than most of the young men whom one meets nowadays; and then his manners are so very superior to theirs! To be sure it is no great compliment to him to say that; because some of them really have no manners at all. Look at your cousin Archie, for instance. I daresay he doesn't mean to be rude, but he has a way of yawning under one's very nose which I can't think gentleman-like; and, to my mind, he is not nearly careful enough about the language that he uses in the presence of ladies."

"Has he been saying anything indecent?" asked Cicely, absently.

"My *dear* Cicely! Of course, I only meant that he was too much given to slang expressions. Mr. Chetwode, if you have noticed, never interlards his conversation with slang. Mr. Chetwode, in short," concluded Miss Skipwith emphatically, "is a thorough gentleman."

"The inference," observed Cicely, "is flattering to us all. If Archie isn't a gentleman I suppose the rest of us must be snobs; for there's no getting over the fact that his blood is the same as ours."

"It is not altogether a question of blood, my dear; and I am sure that I never denied that your cousin was a gentleman. One may disapprove of a person notwithstanding his being a gentleman by birth."

That Miss Skipwith disapproved of Archie was an

old story, and her motives for so doing were no secret to her niece; but when, encouraged by the latter's silence, the old lady went on to say that no true gentleman was scheming or self-seeking, that greed of money was peculiarly repellent in the young, and a good deal more to the like effect, Cicely grew a little impatient.

"If I wanted to create a prejudice against anyone, I should not set to work in your way, Aunt Susan," she remarked. "One can hardly expect to succeed unless one can hit upon some charges which have at least a faint show of probability about them. But of course you're not a good calumniator, you poor old Aunt Susan," she added, softening at the sight of Miss Skipwith's conscience-stricken countenance: "how should you be? And you're quite wrong about Archie—if that matters."

So saying she moved towards the piano, by way of closing the conversation, while Miss Skipwith sighed heavily.

In the dining-room things were not going on quite so smoothly as they had done before the departure of the ladies. As soon as the men were left to themselves Mr. Bligh apologised to his guest and requested his son to do the honours for him. He had had a rather tiring day, he said, and felt quite worn out.

"I daresay Mr. Chetwode will kindly excuse my lack of ceremony in consideration of my infirmity."

So his servant was rung for and presently he was wheeled away.

"Breaking up fast," remarked Morton laconically, after the door had closed.

"Oh, I hope not," said Mark, wishing to be polite.

Mr. Bligh's heir-apparent laughed rather disagreeably.

"No amount of hoping will keep the governor alive much longer," answered he; "and as far as that goes, I shouldn't think he himself cared about living. What's the use of remaining alive when you've lost the use of your legs? You're only a burden to yourself and to others."

Archie cracked a walnut with unnecessary noise, threw the crackers down upon the table and muttered something under his breath.

"I beg your pardon," said Morton, turning round upon him at once with a deferential smile; "did you make a remark?"

"Yes," answered Archie, "I made a remark. But perhaps I had better not repeat it."

Mark hastily threw himself into the breach with some question about the vintage of the claret they were drinking; but Morton, who may have been a little under the influence of that excellent wine, or may have been determined to exasperate his cousin—possibly both causes were at work—did not choose to be put to silence.

"I always think," said he, throwing himself back in his chair and nursing his leg comfortably, "that the humbug of everyday life is the most gratuitous of the many miseries which we are in the habit of inflicting upon ourselves in this country. It serves absolutely no purpose, because nobody is deceived by it; it makes political speeches intolerably dull and leading articles simply unreadable. One must forgive lawyers and parsons and diplomatists, because it's their trade to say

what they don't think, and their bread and butter depends upon it; but why the deuce shouldn't the rest of us acknowledge what we can't conceal? In my own humble way I endeavour to do so; and when a man is palpably dying I don't pretend to think that he will live for another twenty years."

Mark tried to give the discussion an academical turn, and for a short space of time he was successful. He could not, however, do the whole of the talking himself, and so Morton soon found an opportunity of harking back to the original subject.

"Family affection," said he, "may be a very pretty thing where it exists; but where it doesn't exist, and where everybody knows that it doesn't, one merely behaves like a fool by making a show of it. When a man stands between me and a fortune, and when he happens to be afflicted with an incurable disease into the bargain, I confess that nothing seems to me more desirable than his removal to a happier sphere."

This was too much for Archie, who exclaimed:

"I believe you're the only man in England, Morton, who would say such a thing as that about his father in his father's house!"

"In all probability I am," agreed Morton, imperturbably; "that is just what I modestly venture to pride myself upon. You'll admit that I'm not the only man in England who holds such views; my peculiarity consists in my expressing them. And, mind you, I shouldn't for a moment hesitate to express them to the governor himself."

"Even you would hardly be such a blackguard as that!" cried Archie, hotly.

If Morton's object had been to make a short-tempered young man angry, he had attained it; but his own temper, though of a very different order, was not in the least under his control, and for all his love of plain language, it did not please him to hear himself called a blackguard. He shot a singularly malevolent glance across the table at his cousin as he said:—

"All the same, you are quite as anxious as I am—a little more anxious, perhaps—to hear the governor's will read. You have done your best, in your rather clumsy way, to cut me out; but I shouldn't wonder if you were to meet with a disappointment after all. Toadying doesn't always pay."

"I can't submit to such a gross insult as that from any man," Archie declared, jumping up. "You must apologise for it at once, or either you or I must leave the house."

"A more appalling threat I never heard," chuckled Morton. "It will be painful to lose you; but I am afraid we must make up our minds to the loss, because I don't intend to go, and I certainly don't intend to apologise."

At this juncture Mark the pacificator thought it high time to intervene.

"Pardon me, gentlemen," said he, with a certain air of authority, "but you are both very much in the wrong. You have both said things which you do not really mean, and which I am sure you will see that you ought to retract."

Each of the disputants shook his head decisively, but Mark took no notice of that. He proceeded to point out that in a country like England, where the

satisfaction which would be promptly demanded and granted elsewhere has been done away with by common consent, opprobrious epithets are clearly inadmissible. Then, with some adroitness, he observed that Morton could not actually believe in the very offensive charge which he had brought against his cousin, or he never would have put it into words. When one is apprehensive of being supplanted, one does not carefully put one's possible supplanter in the right and oneself in the wrong.

"Of course," he added, "I know nothing of Mr. Bligh's intentions and very little of his ethical standard; but I know that if I had a son who had forced a guest of mine to leave my house by insulting him, I should feel that I owed every reparation to my guest and the sharpest punishment I could inflict to my son."

By the time that he had finished his harangue he had made one of the men ashamed of himself and had frightened the other; and so the incident terminated with a somewhat grudging exchange of apologies. The cousins, it need scarcely be said, were no better friends than they had been before; but they perceived the expediency of adjourning their quarrel. Morton went straight off to the smoking-room, while the other two joined Miss Skipwith and Cicely; and as the latter was still seated at the piano, Mark contrived to exchange a few words with her in private, under cover of the resonant chords which she continued to strike upon that instrument.

"If you are not careful there will be bloodshed in this house," said he laughingly. "I have patched

up a peace for to-night; but I do not answer for the future."

Cicely looked alarmed.

"Have Morton and Archie fallen out?" she asked, anxiously.

"Very much so. At home—in Russia, I mean—I could have done nothing; matters went too far. As it was I induced them to shake hands: *quittes à recommencer.*"

"They must not be allowed to quarrel!" exclaimed Cicely. "It would distress Papa beyond everything; and there is really no reason why they should quarrel."

"As for that, of course I do not know; but I doubt whether they can be kept within bounds unless they are held back by strong hands. Could you, do you think, restrain your cousin? For your brother"—here Mark could not repress a look of contempt, which Cicely saw without resenting—"I really believe that I may venture to make myself responsible."

Now this was very kind of Mr. Chetwode, and Cicely felt proportionately grateful to him. She endeavoured to express her thanks, but had not much time for doing so, because Miss Skipwith and Archie, who had nothing to say to one another, very soon interrupted her. Mark, however, went away very well satisfied with his evening's work. He had somewhat strengthened his hold over Morton, he had averted, what might have been a little dangerous, the elevation of Archie to the rank of an aggrieved person, and, best of all, he had established something like a secret understanding with Miss Bligh.

CHAPTER XVI.

ARCHIE'S TRIUMPH.

WHILE Cicely was dressing on the following morning she made up her mind to give her cousin a lecture. Although she had been a good deal distressed at hearing that the dining-room had so nearly been made the scene of an unseemly brawl, Archie's foolish behaviour had at least had the effect of making her more comfortable in one respect, inasmuch as it had relieved her of the unwonted feeling of shyness in his presence with which she had been afflicted the night before. In her heart she rather liked him for attacking Morton, who, she was sure, had deserved it; still he must certainly be lectured.

So, as soon as breakfast was over, she followed him into the conservatory, whither he had betaken himself with a cigarette and a handful of letters, and drawing a wicker chair up to his side, seated herself upon it with an air of stern resolution.

"Archie," said she, "I am sorry to find that you can't keep your word—or your temper either!"

Archie raised a somewhat troubled countenance from his correspondence.

"Has that beast, Morton, been telling you anything?" he asked.

"No, 'that beast, Morton,' has kept his own counsel.

It was Mr. Chetwode who told me that he had had to drag you apart. Now, you know, Archie, you promised me that you wouldn't quarrel with Morton."

"I don't think I quite promised that, did I? I said I wouldn't quarrel with him if I could help it, and goodness knows I have tried hard enough to help it! But there must be limits to everybody's patience and meekness. You don't know what things that fellow says."

"Why will you never understand that it doesn't signify what he says?"

"I can't help feeling that it does signify a little to me when he tells me that I have done my very best to cut him out of his inheritance, and that I came down here on purpose to 'toady' Uncle Wilfrid."

"Did he say that?"

"Yes, 'toady' was the very word that he used. Ought I to have bowed and held my tongue?"

"Well—it isn't true, you see; and he only said it to enrage you, not because he believed it."

"So Chetwode seemed to think; but I don't know that one ought to be expected to submit to an insult just because it is a palpable lie. However I had told him a few minutes before that he was a blackguard—which he is—so that I had to some extent put myself in the wrong, and we ended by burying the hatchet."

"I'm afraid you buried it in some place where it can very easily be scratched up again. I don't feel that I have much right to scold you, Archie, because you certainly have been patient upon the whole, and you have had a good deal to put up with; but will you

waive your rights and be patient a little longer, for Papa's sake and mine?"

The young man's face brightened up wonderfully at this appeal.

"Of course I will," he answered. "I'm not very good-tempered, I'm sorry to say, and sometimes I feel as if it would be a righteous deed to catch Morton by the throat and choke him. But I won't choke him, or even tell him what I think of him again. After all, if he becomes unbearable one can always go out of the room. Besides," he added, with a sigh and a change of tone, "I shan't have many more chances of giving trouble, for I have just had orders to join at Aldershot on Friday, instead of a fortnight hence as I expected. It's a horrid bore."

"Will you think me very unkind if I say that I am glad?" asked Cicely.

"When Morton came you begged me not to leave you alone with him," Archie remarked, rather reproachfully.

"Yes, because I didn't think then that he would stay long; but now I don't see any prospect of getting rid of him, and though I quite believe that you will try your best to be forbearing, it isn't pleasant for you or me or anybody to go on as we have been doing lately. As it is, we'll manage to enjoy ourselves during your last few days. Now I must be off, or I shall get behindhand with all my morning's duties."

On her way through the hall she encountered Morton, to whom she thought it might be as well to impart the news of Archie's imminent departure, and who heard it with a satisfaction which he made no attempt

to disguise. Morton, as it happened, had that morning received an urgent summons to London where certain private affairs of his, which have nothing to do with this narrative, demanded his attention; but he had almost decided to let these affairs look after themselves as best they could, because he did not like the idea of leaving the enemy in possession of the field. Now, however, the case was altered. Archie might, it was true, offer himself to Cicely in the course of the next day or two; but that he could not, under any circumstances, have prevented him from doing, and it was needless to keep strict watch and ward over a man who would so soon be out of the way. When once he was gone, time would be upon the side of Cicely's affectionate brother and Mark Chetwode.

Morton, therefore, said:—

"I find I shall have to run up to London myself this afternoon. Only for three days, though; so you needn't shed tears. Let me see, this is Thursday, and I promised to dine with Chetwode on Monday. I think I could just manage to get through what I have to do by Monday evening, and I can drive straight to Upton Chetwode from the station. By the way, if you're going to the back regions you might tell somebody that I shall want the brougham at three o'clock sharp."

At luncheon, when the whole party met, Morton was in high good humour and charmingly affable with everybody, actually offering to charge himself with any commissions that his aunt might desire to have executed in London. So pleased was he to notice that Cicely's spirits had been in no way depressed by the intelligence which had exhilarated his own that he an-

nounced his intention of buying her a birthday present.

"I don't know when your birthday is, but as I probably forgot it last year and the year before, I have some arrears to make up."

Even for Archie he had a word or two of sour-sweet civility.

"Going back to your regiment, I hear. Well, I should think you will find Aldershot rather livelier than Abbotsport. Sorry we haven't been able to make your stay pleasanter; but our resources are limited, as you know. We'll try to do better if you look us up next winter. I suppose you'll hardly get leave again before then?"

With a truly heroic effort, Archie summoned up a distorted smile, which nearly upset Cicely's gravity, and grunted out "Thanks." To be spoken to as though he had been Morton's guest and to receive Morton's apologies for the dulness of the Priory was indeed hard to bear. However, the man was going, and he had three happy days to look forward to; at least, he hoped they would be happy, and in his anxiety to make them so it seemed to him wisest to put off till the last hour the momentous question upon which the happiness of his future life must depend.

But when Morton had been whirled away in the brougham, and when Cicely, of her own accord, invited him to walk with her as far as the game-keeper's cottage, where she had a sick child to visit, he felt so much encouraged that he began to reconsider that decision. After all, she already knew that he loved her; would it not be better to tell her so plainly, instead of

to keep hinting at it? To be at once accepted was more than he hoped for; he would be quite satisfied with an admission that he need not altogether despair. No sooner, therefore, had he and his companion reached the outskirts of the woods through which their path lay than he drew a long breath and plunged head first into a subject to which he had made several futile attempts to lead up.

"You said, this morning," he began, rather hoarsely, "that we would enjoy ourselves during my last few days here. There is only one thing that can make me enjoy myself now, and I needn't tell you what that is. Can you give it me, Cicely?"

The girl stood still, looking at him seriously and with a sort of kindly compassion.

"I don't know," she answered; "it depends upon how much you ask for."

"Oh, I only ask for very little," he declared, eagerly. "If you will but give me leave to hope that perhaps, some day, you may care for me a tenth part as much as I care for you, that shall be enough."

And gaining courage, now that he was fairly under way, he launched forth into fervent protestations which, like all words that come straight from the heart, had a certain effect of eloquence, but of which it would scarcely be fair to give a *verbatim* report.

When he paused, Cicely, who had resumed her walk, held out her hand to him and said, in a far humbler tone than was usual with her:—

"Thank you, Archie; any woman might be proud to be loved by you, and I know very well how little I deserve to be loved in that way—but I suppose one's

deserts haven't much to say to such questions. Now I want to tell you the exact truth. I wish I loved you as you love me; but I don't."

"Of course you don't!" interrupted Archie. "I never dreamt of such a thing. I shall be more than content if you can care for me the least little bit."

"I care a great deal," Cicely answered; "but perhaps a great deal isn't enough. I don't think it is in my nature to fall desperately in love with anybody, and in many ways I seem to myself to be cut out for an old maid. But I know that nothing could make Papa happier than to hear that we were engaged, and if we were married I think I could promise to be a good wife to you. It isn't as if I liked anyone else better," she added, almost deprecatingly.

Archie had never anticipated being met in such a spirit as that. He was overjoyed, and could only stammer out incoherent phrases of delight and gratitude.

"But, Cicely," he broke off suddenly, "will you be happy with me? That is the question."

She shook her head.

"No," she answered, with a calmer insight into the future than he could as yet attain to, "that isn't the question. The question is whether you will be happy with me. What satisfies you now may not satisfy you always; you may think that if I am not in love with you at this moment I shall be before long—and then you may be disappointed."

Of course that was just what he did think, and most people would have told him that, under the circumstances, he was fully justified in so thinking. A

man when he is in love is aware of the fact; but it is said—truly or untruly—that women are often unconscious of their own sentiments, and there is also an impression, so general that it can hardly be altogether devoid of foundation, to the effect that in nine cases out of ten a wife will end by loving her husband unless he treats her badly. Archie, however, as was but natural, disclaimed such ambitious aspirations. He was willing and thankful to take all risks, he declared, and it was quite impossible that he could incur any disappointments.

Well, whatever the future might have in store for him he had not much to complain of in the present. Cicely had no idea of doing things by halves, and since Archie was to be her husband, it was her duty, she thought, to please him. Her efforts in that direction were quite successful and met with their reward; because in pleasing him she also to some extent pleased herself. It is, no doubt, pleasant to be adored. Besides, she was really very fond of Archie.

The game-keeper's little daughter was in luck that afternoon; for not only did she receive a visit from Miss Cicely (whom she loved, yet of whom she was considerably in awe), but after a time a very nice gentleman, who had been waiting about in the garden, stepped in, cracked some excellent jokes, and, on leaving, slipped nothing less than a golden sovereign into her small palm! Indeed it is well that that did not happen to be one of Cicely's days for going the round of Abbotsport, otherwise it is to be feared that night would have fallen upon some distressing scenes of intemperance.

When one is exceptionally happy it is only human that one should wish to give others a chance of being happy too, if they can manage it; but one can't expect everybody to drink one's health, and Miss Skipwith was very much disinclined to pay Archie that compliment on being requested to do so, the same evening, by her brother-in-law. Miss Skipwith could not but feel that Cicely was throwing herself away sadly; added to which the triumph of Archie was very bitter to her. When Mr. Bligh, in the exuberance of his satisfaction, proposed the above toast after dinner, the old lady raised her glass to her lips and set it down again with its contents undiminished. She became, however, a little more reconciled to the engagement when she was subsequently informed that Archie's triumph was not quite of the kind that she had imagined, and that it was not in contemplation to make him inheritor of his uncle's estates. That was satisfactory in so far as it served to clear his character; but it was melancholy to think that Morton, not Cicely, was destined to reign at the Priory, and she could not resist saying as much to her informant, who answered:—

"I am quite of your opinion, Susan; it is melancholy. Nevertheless it is inevitable; so we may as well put a bright face upon it."

When Mr. Bligh spoke in that tone of voice his sister-in-law always succumbed. He was a man who, as regarded trifles, preferred giving in to being worried, so that she not unfrequently found it to be her duty to worry him; but in matters of more importance he took his own way, and had a quiet and convincing fashion of letting those about him understand that he

meant to do so. Miss Skipwith, therefore, endeavoured to put on a bright face, which feat was the more easy of accomplishment because Cicely's face was so bright. The main thing, after all, was that Cicely should be happy.

And happy Cicely certainly appeared to be. During the next three days she rode, walked and talked with Archie continually, and did not weary of his company. No doubt she saw him at his best, which she had not always done of late; but after making all deductions, the fact remained that he was, as she had told him, a man of whose love any woman might be proud, and she did not regret her choice. Once or twice, to be sure, she thought with a pang of poor Bobby; but perhaps Bobby would not hear of her engagement before he had reached his tropical destination, and by that time his wound would probably have healed. The engagement, it was agreed, was not to be formally announced as yet, nor was any date fixed for the marriage.

"I can't leave Papa with only Aunt Susan to attend him," Cicely said; and Archie acquiesced. It was only too plain that the delay stipulated for was not likely to be a very long one.

Mr. Bligh, for his part, was in no hurry to get rid of his daughter, and thought it as well that the young man should return to duty for a time. He wished him, however, to send in his papers before his marriage, and this Archie expressed his willingness to do. Indeed, when the day came for his departure he felt very much inclined to send them in forthwith.

"I beg you will do no such thing!" said Cicely,

laughing. "Have you forgotten that Morton comes back to-night?"

"I'm not afraid of him," answered Archie.

"Perhaps not; but I am. At least I should be in perpetual terror of your devouring one another if you were both living in the house. No, I should prefer your remaining at Aldershot until he has accustomed his mind to the idea that you will be his brother-in-law some day. It's a merciful thing that you will have left before he arrives."

"I suppose I had better go up by the three-thirty train," observed Archie ruefully.

"That depends upon whether you want to be at Aldershot this evening or not. If not, you might stay until after dinner; because Morton is going to dine at Upton Chetwode and intends to dress there, so that there is not much fear of his appearance here before the coast is clear!"

Archie jumped at this reprieve as eagerly as if he had been a school-boy on the last day of the holidays. He was, in truth, very like a school-boy in more ways than one, and that perhaps was what had won him the place which he held in Cicely's heart; for she always got on best with those whom she could patronise a little. His talk, when he was happy and at his ease, was of that artlessly selfish kind which no one, surely, can help enjoying. He would chatter away by the hour about his brother officers and the exceedingly humorous practical jokes which they were wont to play upon one another, and about polo and tent-pegging and pig-sticking and other enlivenments of Indian military life, while Cicely encouraged him by her questions. Per-

haps one reason why she never wearied of hearing him dilate upon these themes was that the discussion of them prevented him from being too affectionate.

"Would there be any harm," he asked her, "in telling the fellows that I am engaged to be married? It's so difficult to keep a thing of that sort to one-self!"

"By all means tell them, if you like," answered Cicely, laughing; "there is no occasion to make a secret of it. Only I hope you won't bore them by dwelling too much upon the perfections of your betrothed."

"Oh, *they* won't mind," Archie declared reassuringly. "Especially if they know that I shall leave the regiment when I marry. Of course we don't care about having many married men."

"And aren't you afraid that you will miss your friends, and polo, and all the rest of it, when you settle down to a humdrum country life?"

He made the reply which might have been anticipated. Life with her on a desert island would be a thousand times better than life anywhere without her; but life in the neighbourhood of Abbotsport would be simply the realization of his wildest dreams.

"And even if we did find it slow—which is impossible—we could have people down to stay with us. One can always get heaps of men to come, by offering them a little shooting or hunting."

"Well, let us hope so," said Cicely. "Papa thinks Upton Chetwode would do for us. We could certainly get a lease of the place, and perhaps Mr. Chetwode might be persuaded to sell. Papa means to sound him upon the subject, and if he is successful he says he

will make us a wedding present of it. It's a dear old house; it only wants a little outlay to be made charming."

This conversation took place during the last few minutes of Archie's stay at the Priory. It was a fine moonlight night, and as the dog-cart had come round rather early, he had sent the groom on with his luggage, saying that he would walk to the station by the short cut across the fields. Cicely had accompanied him to the end of the garden, and they were now standing beside a little iron gate which divided it from the park.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the young fellow, "how awfully good Uncle Wilfrid is! It seems to me that I am just about the luckiest beggar in the whole world!"

"If you think so," Cicely answered smiling, "that is the same thing as being so, I suppose."

Then she cut short his *adieux,* over which he was inclined to linger, telling him that he would have to put his best leg foremost if he didn't want to miss the train. She watched his tall, lithe figure as he strode across the grass in the moonlight, and waved her hand to him when he turned to signal a last farewell. She said to herself that she certainly loved him. What a pity that there should be a difference—possibly rather a wide difference—between loving and being in love!

CHAPTER XVII.

MORTON SCANDALISES HIS HOST.

It was well for Morton Bligh's peace of mind, and well also for the comfort of those with whom he was brought into contact in London, that he was ignorant of the terrible things which had been taking place at the Priory during his absence. He felt little or no anxiety upon the point; being persuaded, for one thing, that Mark Chetwode had produced an impression upon his sister, and, for another, that Archie had not utilised his opportunities as he might have done.

"To get on the blind side of the governor," soliloquised Morton, as he sat in the train which was bearing him southwards, "one must affect a good deal of bluntness; and that young fool has overdone the modest, diffident business, I suspect. Anyhow, if Cicely refuses him, he's out of it: the governor won't disinherit both his children, that's certain."

And very agreeable it was to Morton to reflect that it would now no longer be necessary for him to mount guard so vigilantly at the Priory. If there was one thing more abhorrent to him than another it was rusticity; and he would have cared little enough about his birthright if drawing the revenues arising from the Bligh estates had implied residence upon the spot. He was never really comfortable out of London, where, although, as has been said, a good many people declined to have

anything to do with him, he had still a sufficiency of friends, who may have been less particular or may have thought that his moral character concerned them less than his ability to provide them with capital dinners.

"I shall keep coming and going; that will be the best plan," he mused. "Unless I'm greatly mistaken, Chetwode has swallowed the bait; he can't want much spurring on or backing up. Still one ought to be upon the spot from time to time, if only for the sake of appearances. It's a bore, but it's better than having to spend weeks at a stretch in that God-forsaken hole; and I daresay it won't last long. Those good folks may console themselves with the thought that they'll see no more of me than I can help after my revered predecessor has been laid to rest in the family vault. Once let me get possession, and they may all go to the deuce together for anything that I shall care. Cicely will have my full consent to marry whom she pleases then, and if she chooses Archie in preference to Chetwode I shall be most happy to escort her to church and give her away. I rejoice in promoting the welfare of my fellow-creatures, so long as it doesn't interfere with my own."

Revolving these and other sentiments, not less handsome and liberal, in his mind, Morton reached the end of his journey homewards in very good humour. In obedience to his instructions, a carriage had been sent from the Priory to meet him, and he was at once driven to Upton Chetwode, where he was received by Mark's French valet. That urbane personage, apologising for his master, who had not yet come in, conducted Morton to one of the spacious, dismal bedrooms, unpacked his

dress-clothes for him, and retired with the remark that dinner would be served in half an hour precisely.

"The fellow speaks as if one of the cook's exquisite *plats* might be spoilt by being kept waiting," thought Morton, with some amusement. "I don't suppose there'll be much to spoil. What a nuisance it must be to be as badly off as Chetwode! However, it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good, and his poverty makes him handy just at present. He ought to be uncommonly grateful to me for giving him such a chance of making a first-rate alliance."

But when he went downstairs to the drawing-room, where his host was awaiting him, he could detect no sign of gratitude nor even of pleasure upon that gentleman's face. Mark, as he held out his hand, said, "I am glad to see you," but he did not look glad; he looked bored and worried, and responded somewhat chillingly to the other's boisterous cordiality.

Almost the first thing that Morton said was:—

"Well, thank goodness, we've seen the last of our friend Archie for some time to come. I suppose you've heard that he has gone back to his regiment?"

Mark looked at the speaker with a faint ironical smile.

"Yes," he answered. "I heard that your cousin was to leave to-day. That is good news, isn't it?"

"Well, *I* consider it so," answered Morton. "And," he added with a knowing glance, "I should think you would too."

But Mark did not choose to understand this delicate allusion. He raised his eyebrows slightly and said:—

"Oh, your cousin did not interfere with me in any

way. I seldom met him, and had not your reasons for disliking him."

Morton, who was a good deal afraid of the man whom he hoped to make his accomplice, did not venture to pursue the subject farther, and presently they adjourned to the dining-room, where, to the great surprise of the guest, a very cleverly cooked little dinner was set before them. After a time Morton could no longer refrain from commenting upon the phenomenon.

"Where the deuce did you get your cook from, Chetwode? Not from Abbotsport, or anywhere near it, I'll be bound."

"Well, no," answered Mark. "My cook—or at least the person who has been so kind as to cook for us to-night—hails from Paris. For the credit of the house he doesn't mind exercising his skill when I have a guest; but he won't cook for me, and when I am alone I am at the mercy of an aged native who can just manage a mutton-chop and no more. Fortunately, I don't care much what I eat or drink."

Morton, who cared a very great deal, thought it still more fortunate that the establishment included an intermittent culinary artist. He did full justice to each dish in turn, and also thoroughly appreciated the wine, which, for many years past, had been maturing in a locked-up cellar; so that by the time he had been provided with black coffee and a cigarette he saw the world and all that therein is through a beautiful rose-coloured haze. And now it was that Mark, who during dinner had spoken little, had drunk less, and had scarcely eaten at all, judged it appropriate to make a

communication which motives of hospitality and charity had thus far induced him to withhold.

"I am afraid, my dear Bligh," said he, "that I am going to tell you something which will not exactly delight you. From all that you have been saying, I presume that you have not yet heard the news of your sister's engagement to your cousin."

"What!" exclaimed Morton, starting so violently that he spilt the half of his coffee. "Oh, I see—you're chaffing. You wouldn't take it quite so coolly as that if it were true."

"Why should I not take it coolly?" asked Mark. "At all events, it is perfectly true."

"I don't believe it!" Morton declared. "If you aren't humbugging me, somebody has been humbugging you."

"Possibly; but I think not. My informant was Mrs. Lowndes, whom I met this afternoon, and who had received her information from Miss Skipwith. According to Miss Skipwith, the engagement is not to be publicly announced just yet, but the family have no wish to keep it secret from their friends. Mr. Bligh is said to be very much pleased about it."

That seemed terribly circumstantial. Morton's incredulity gave place to a sudden gust of fury, and he burst forth into language respecting his father which cannot be reported here.

"Pleased!" he exclaimed. "I should rather think he would be pleased! Why, he has been moving Heaven and earth to bring about this accursed marriage! It shan't take place though. I'll stop it—we must stop it! Dash it all, man, why do you sit grinning

there, as if it were a good joke? Don't you understand that *everything* depends upon our putting a stop to this at once?"

Mark surveyed his angry questioner with unconcealed contempt and disgust.

"I quite understand," he answered coldly, "that your prospect of becoming your father's heir depends in all probability upon your power to break off a match which he seems to have arranged. Cursing, however, will hardly help you. Might I request you, as a personal favour, not to do it any more? It may be prejudice on my part, but it is extremely disagreeable to me to hear a man cursing his father—especially when he uses such very coarse forms of malediction."

"My father hates me, and I hate him," returned Morton sullenly; "we have different ways of expressing our hatred, that's all. I'm sorry I shocked your sense of propriety; but you must allow that I have had great provocation. It's enough to put any man's back up to have such a dirty trick played upon him."

"Oh, it's provoking for you, no doubt."

"And not altogether pleasant for you either, I imagine. Come, Chetwode, I think you and I have understood one another pretty well, though we haven't put our thoughts into plain English before. You know why my father wants to marry Cicely to his nephew. He would a great deal rather leave the place to her than to me, but he doesn't like to leave it to anybody but a Bligh. Consequently he had to provide her with a husband of that name. Of course, in self-defence, I had to try and find her a husband with some other name——"

"And you did me the great honour to select me. I was duly sensible of it."

"I don't know why you should take up that tone, Chetwode. My feeling to you has always been a most friendly one, I'm sure. I thought that if Cicely married you she would marry a gentleman and a good fellow; and the advantage wouldn't have been all on one side, for, as I believe I told you, she will come into at least fifty thousand pounds at her father's death. Moreover, it appeared to me that you were very willing to lend yourself to the plan."

"That may be."

"And if I weren't afraid of offending you, I would make so bold as to say that I thought you were becoming rather—er—fond of my sister, apart from any consideration of money."

"You do not offend me by saying so."

"Well, then, my dear fellow, surely you are not going to be such a—I mean, you surely won't give up the game before it is lost! You're altogether mistaken if you imagine she has lost her heart to that long-legged donkey. She has been talked into this, and she can be talked out of it again. Not by me, I admit, because she shares the family affection for me; but if you can't accomplish that much you're not the man I take you for. Archie hasn't got an extension of leave, I suppose, has he?"

"No; he was to return to his regiment to-day, I understood."

"The field is clear, then: all that you have to do is to cut him out with Cicely, which, I should say, is well within your capacity. Meanwhile, I'll do what I can

with the governor. When all's said and done, he has a conscience, or flatters himself that he has. And then, I daresay, by raking about a little, I might be able to furnish him with an awkward story or two about his precious nephew. A man doesn't knock about a garrison town long without getting into a scrape of *some* sort or kind, you may be sure."

Perhaps it was only this last phrase which saved Mark from yielding to the voice of the tempter and entering into a discreditable compact. During the first part of Morton's speech his eyes had brightened; after which he had turned them away and gazed pensively at his neat little shoes. But if his code of honour was hardly that of an ordinary English gentleman, it was not wide enough to admit association with such a pitiable sneak as Morton Bligh. Therefore he only said:—

"You are very flattering, but I am afraid you must not count on my assistance."

"Why not?" asked Morton sharply.

"For various reasons, with which I won't trouble you; because I should despair of making you understand them."

"The long and the short of it is, then, that you mean to leave me in the lurch?"

"If you like to call it so."

"Hum! Well, you're a nice sort of friend, I must say!"

For the first time that evening Mark laughed outright.

"You honour me very much when you describe me as your friend," said he, "and I would not for the world appear ungracious or ungrateful. Still I can't resist asking you whether you were really under the impres-

sion that I should pay my addresses to your sister for love of you?"

Morton made no reply. A liqueur decanter of cognac had been brought in with the coffee, and to this he had been devoting himself assiduously during the last few minutes. That was a kind of indulgence which he could never permit himself with impunity, so that by this time his ideas had lost all distinctness of outline. One thing only was quite clear to him: by hook or by crook, his sister must be prevented from marrying Archie.

"I'll clear that fellow out of my path somehow," he declared resolutely, after his host had been waiting a long time for him to speak.

"I am sure it would be wise on your part to do so," answered Mark, who began to find the man rather amusing, and had got over a strong desire to kick him out of the house; "the only question is how are you to do it? In this overcivilised country one can't assassinate one's enemies, or even get them assassinated."

But Morton was very bold and said:—

"If I had him here now he shouldn't leave this room alive, I can tell you!" Whereat Mark laughed again.

For a time it was a little diverting to listen to the vapourings of this half-tipsy fool; but when these degenerated into mere impotent blasphemy Mark grew disgusted once more, and out of sheer weariness began to take Archie's part.

"I really don't see why you should feel so much animosity against him," he said at length. "He appears to me to be a very commonplace, honest sort of

a young man, and quite genuinely in love with his cousin."

"Oh, you think so, do you?" snarled Morton. "That's all you know about him. Commonplace he may be; but I'll be shot if he's honest! Anybody, except the governor, who didn't choose to see, would have seen what his game was all along. Why, even old Aunt Susan saw it! I'm not beat yet, though, I can tell him. He shall live to regret having stolen a march upon me!"

And so forth, and so forth, for the best part of another quarter of an hour. Morton showed no disposition to move, nor was it possible to get him to talk about anything save the one all-important subject. The longest lane, however, has a turning, and when the liqueur decanter had been drained to its last drop, Morton rose, steadying himself by the table, and said he supposed it was about time to order the brougham.

Mark rang the bell with alacrity, and then was revealed the unpleasant circumstance that no brougham was forthcoming. Perhaps the disused stables were not fit for horses to be put up in; perhaps the coachman, having received no orders to wait, may have taken it for granted that Morton proposed to sleep where he dined; or, perhaps (for like the rest of the servants at the Priory he had no love for his future master), he may not have been unwilling to play a trick upon that gentleman. In any case he had driven straight home, and it was now too late to think of sending to Abbotsport for a fly. What was to be done? Mark, of course, could do no less than offer his guest a bed; but he was relieved when the latter, after considering for a while

and heaping many injurious epithets upon the coachman, decided that he would walk home.

"Well, it's a beautiful night," said Mark.

It was a beautiful night, and the moonlight made everything so clear that even a man in Morton's condition could see his way as well as if it had been noon-day. Whether, even if it had been noon-day, it would have been quite safe to let him go home alone was another question; but Mark was so thoroughly sick of him that he felt quite unable to offer his services as an escort. He stood on the steps and watched the departure of the belated reveller, who really went wonderfully straight, considering all things. Every now and then he stopped and pawed the air in the attempt to ascend an imaginary hill, and once or twice he took great pains to circumnavigate some non-existent obstacle; but he kept on moving in the right direction, and there seemed to be a very fair chance of his reaching his destination eventually.

"And if he tumbles into a ditch and lies there till he dies, nobody will be one penny the worse," reflected Mark. "That, however, will not happen. He is far too obnoxious a member of society to come to an untimely end."

Mark turned away from the door and strolled across the terrace on the south side of the house, where there was a stone balustrade, overgrown with ivy and lichen. Upon this he dropped his elbows, and so stood for a long time, lost in gloomy meditation. The intelligence which inquisitive little Mrs. Lowndes had taken such pleasure in imparting to him had fallen upon him like

a thunderbolt from a clear sky. The idea of reconstructing his fallen fortunes by means of a marriage with Cicely Bligh was one which at first he had contemplated with little more than languid acquiescence, but latterly, as we know, his feelings had undergone a change; and then, too, there is all the difference in the world between a desirable thing which you may have for the asking and a thing which you can't possibly have, however much you may desire it. He had, it is true, soon discovered that the siege and capture of Cicely's heart would be a task demanding some skill, labour and patience, but he had looked forward with a good deal of confidence to the result of his operations. He had made the mistake of despising Archie; he had felt convinced that the young man's chance was not worth considering, and now he was bitterly disappointed. And the worst of it was that it was not the loss of her fortune that disappointed him. He tried to persuade himself that it was, and he was in a measure successful, because the prospect of lingering on at Upton Chetwode in extreme poverty was appalling enough, but in the end he had to face the truth, which was anything but welcome to him.

"I love her," he muttered, "and a pretty fool I am for my pains! It is rather late in the day for me to be making myself miserable because a little girl prefers a subaltern with a pair of spurs and a long sword to a middle-aged civilian. Don't little girls always prefer subalterns to middle-aged civilians? And are their preferences a matter of any importance? Yet—how can one help oneself? It is a malady like other human maladies, and one gets over it in time, as one gets over

the others unless one happens to die of them. But it hurts while it lasts."

He sighed and turned back into the house, where one of Madame Souravieff's bulky letters was lying on his table unopened. He smiled ironically as his eye fell on it, remembering that he had once been deeply in love with Madame Souravieff.

"Come," he said to himself, "there are compensations in every lot; now at least I have escaped the risk of being poisoned or stabbed."

CHAPTER XVIII.

FORTUNA SÆVO LÆTA NEGOTIO.

A PECULIAR feature of English railway management, which everybody must have noticed, is that the train is invariably behind its time when one turns up at the station with five minutes to spare, and just as invariably punctual if, by some unusual mischance, one happens to be a minute or two late. Archie, perhaps, was not yet sufficiently advanced in life to have learnt that this is a rule without an exception; at all events, he was not much alarmed when, on consulting his watch, he found he had run things rather fine. The express was due at Abbotsport Road at 10.30; it was now twenty-eight minutes past ten, and he was still nearly a quarter of a mile from the station. However, he set out at a slinging trot and had the satisfaction of arriving breathless upon the platform just as the tail lamp of the express was disappearing.

"Dear me, sir, you was very nearly in time," said the porter commiseratingly. "I've got your luggage labelled, but I didn't like to put it in—not afore I see you, sir."

"What on earth am I to do?" ejaculated Archie. "I'm bound to be at Aldershot to-morrow morning."

"Oh, that'll be all right, sir; there's the 12.15 as'll get you up plenty o' time, though 'tis a slow train."

Well, this was better than having to order a special; still it was a very great nuisance, and the prospect of waiting an hour and three quarters on a deserted platform was not cheerful. Archie, however, was in so happy a mood that night that he was prepared to accept all ordinary annoyances philosophically, and he did not spend much time in grumbling. Having lighted a cigar he tried walking up and down the platform for a few minutes; but finding that intolerable, he left the precincts of the station and sauntered across the fields in a seaward direction, congratulating himself upon the mildness and beauty of the night. After all, he had so much to think about that the time did not seem very long. It is a pathetic testimony to the predominant sadness of life that no one ever doubts the reality of his misfortunes, whereas the effect of unexpected happiness is so frequently to shake the happy mortal's conviction of his own identity. Archie was still in that blissful state of semi-scepticism. A week ago he would have been only too thankful for a word of encouragement from Cicely; that she would accept him at the first time of asking he had never for a moment expected. And now he was going to be married to her! Going to be married very soon, too, perhaps; for although dates had not yet been mentioned, it was evident Mr. Bligh was not in favour of indefinite delay, and that if a home could be found for his daughter near him, he would be willing to let her quit the shelter of his roof. Archie kept repeating to himself that these things could not be, for the pleasure of assuring himself that they were. He did not notice particularly in what direction he was walking, but simply followed his nose,

which happened to point due south, and so, after a time, he came perforce to a standstill; for now he had reached the edge of the cliffs and was looking down upon a little shingly bay, where the waves broke with a soft swish and a rattle of loose pebbles far beneath him. On his right hand a portion of Abbotsport was distinguishable, and on his left was a belt of trees, towards which the footpath upon which he was standing led.

Now this footpath afforded the most direct means of communication between the Priory and Upton Chetwode, and, as ill luck would have it, it was along this footpath that Morton Bligh was even then wending his homeward way. Archie was disturbed in the midst of a pleasing vision by the sound of uncertain footsteps, and, turning his head to see who was coming, recognised his cousin, who at the same moment recognised him. Both men stood still and stared. It was no longer possible to avoid a meeting which one of them, at any rate, would gladly have escaped; but as neither of them had been in the least prepared for it, a few instants of silence and hesitation ensued. Morton spoke first.

"What the devil are you doing here?" he asked in a thick voice.

"Nothing unlawful, I assure you," answered Archie, laughing. "I've managed to miss my train, that's all; so I've got to wander about until past midnight."

Morton paid no heed to this explanation, possibly did not even hear it. He was trembling with rage and excitement, and the torrent of incoherent abuse which he began to pour forth was barely intelligible; but it

was evident that he had heard of his sister's engagement and was even more angry about it than might have been anticipated.

Archie thought it best to let him rave on. He was determined to keep his temper, and indeed did not feel at all tempted to lose it. But when Morton proceeded from objurgations to threats, and actually squared up to him in an absurd caricature of a fighting attitude, he said:—

"For Heaven's sake don't make such an ass of yourself! Go home and go to bed, like a reasonable being. There wouldn't be the slightest use in my discussing matters with you now, but when you know all about it to-morrow, you will see that you haven't much cause for complaint. At least, I expect so," added Archie, as a saving clause; for it occurred to him that his uncle might not, perhaps, intend to make the provisions of his will known to his heir-apparent.

"I don't know what you expect, but I know what you'll get—and that's a jolly good thrashing!" called out Morton.

Considering the relative strength of the two men, this menace was sufficiently ridiculous; but Morton, nevertheless, attempted to carry it into effect, so that Archie was compelled in self-defence to reduce him to comparative helplessness by getting behind him and throwing his arms up. In this position the captive kicked out vigorously and the captor's shins suffered a little; but the scuffle could have but one termination.

"I won't hit you again if you'll let me go," gasped out Morton at length.

"Thank you very much," answered Archie, laughing

and releasing him. "Now, if you'll take my advice, you'll get home as quickly as you can, and tell them to bring you some seltzer with a dash of brandy in it the first thing in the morning."

Morton turned sullenly away, making no reply. The struggle had partially sobered him, but it had not made him any steadier on his legs, and Archie, who was at first amused by his divagations, began presently to think that these might prove no laughing matter if persisted in in such dangerous proximity to a precipice. He had not the time, and he certainly had not the inclination, to see his cousin home, but he felt bound in common humanity to conduct him a short distance inland. Accordingly, he strode after him and took him by the arm, saying:—

"I'll walk a bit of the way with you."

"I don't want your company," returned Morton roughly.

"If it comes to that, I am not very anxious for yours; but you had better have somebody to look after you for the next two or three hundred yards. You're awfully drunk, you know, and if you were to slip over the edge anywhere hereabouts you would never move again."

He was quite prepared for another torrent of strong language, but, to his surprise, Morton, whose manner had undergone a sudden and complete change, leant heavily upon his arm and thanked him in a very humble tone of voice for his assistance.

"Devilish kind of you, I'm sure, after the way I treated you just now. You're a good fellow, Archie—upon my word you are! Let's be friends!"

"Oh, all right, anything you like," replied Archie somewhat impatiently. "Come on!" He only wanted to get rid of the wretched creature, and did not take this abrupt tendering of the olive-branch seriously.

"Yes; but you must let me beg your pardon for what I said to you," persisted Morton, as he staggered along. "Quite unjustifiable, I admit. But you'll overlook it, won't you? You'll try to forget it?"

"Certainly; but don't shove me over the cliff in the meantime, please," answered Archie; for his companion kept on lurching against him, and there was not much room to spare.

Now that he was provided with a prop to lean upon, Morton seemed to have lost all control over his movements, nor was it easy to keep him away from the perilous verge towards which he perversely gravitated at every step.

"I'll tell you what it is," exclaimed Archie, at length; "if you go on like this you'll have me down presently; and if I go down you'll go too. Can you understand that much?"

Had there not happened to be on that spot a jutting ledge upon the face of the cliff, those would beyond all doubt have been Archie Bligh's last words on earth; for hardly were they out of his mouth when Morton, wrenching himself away with a sudden jerk, gave him a push which threw him completely off his balance. For one horrible, sickening instant he gave himself up for lost; the next he was hanging over the abyss, one knee supported by the narrow shelf of chalk which had arrested his fall, while his fingers clutched

convulsively at the scanty herbage, by means of which he strove in vain to haul himself up.

Morton, whose pale face, illumined by the moonlight, had an expression of triumphant malignity, stamped upon his hands as he struggled. If the would-be murderer had had nails in his boots he might possibly have achieved his purpose; but he was a small, light man and he was wearing thin evening shoes. All he could do—and this he did during several interminable seconds—was to prevent his victim from obtaining any hold sufficient to support the weight of over twelve stone. Archie felt that he was in deadly peril; he did not know how far the projection upon which his knee was resting could be trusted, and he feared that his nerve was beginning to fail. At last, with a despairing effort, he seized his assailant's leg and, throwing his body forward, just—and only just—managed to fall, gasping and panting, upon his face on the firm land.

The instinct of self-preservation impelled him at once to crawl away from the brink, over which his feet were still hanging, and while he was doing so a loud crashing sound rose to his ears from the beach below. That was really all that he knew about it. Even when he sat up, exhausted and bewildered, and could see no sign of Morton, he did not at once realize that in saving his own life he had taken that of his cousin. Afterwards he remembered in a confused sort of way that Morton had been dragged to the ground, and he thought, but was not sure, that he remembered hearing the unfortunate man cry out; but for the moment he was simply dazed and unable to collect his senses. It was only by degrees that the awful truth dawned upon

him, bringing out a cold sweat upon his forehead and making him shiver from head to foot. Morton was killed—of that there could not be the slightest doubt, for the cliff over which he had fallen was at least four hundred feet in height—and Archie may be forgiven if in the presence of such a catastrophe his first thought was for himself, and not for the man who had attempted to murder him.

For Morton, indeed, nothing could be done; but the survivor surely had need to keep his wits about him, and to take what action might seem best to secure himself against the risk of a horrible accusation. Poor Archie had not all his wits about him, but he had sense enough to be aware that if he rushed straight off to the Priory, gave the alarm and related the whole truth, he would inevitably live out the rest of his life under a certain cloud of suspicion which nothing could remove. Cicely would believe his story; so would his uncle; so, perhaps, but not certainly, would most of his friends and neighbours. But some persons there would undoubtedly be who would shake their heads and purse up their lips. That his cousin and he had been upon bad terms was notorious; it would soon be seen how greatly his worldly prospects were improved by Morton's removal; and the circumstance of his having missed his train and walked back to a place where Morton was likely to be encountered would scarcely escape comment. The more Archie thought of it—and he had not much time for thought—the more he shrank from the only straightforward course, and the more he felt tempted to seek safety in flight.

For flight would mean safety, absolute and com-

plete. No suggestion of foul play would be put forward, because Mark Chetwode must have known that Morton had left his house in a state of intoxication, and that a tipsy man should miss his footing and roll over a cliff was in no way surprising. As for himself, it would hardly be supposed that he had wandered so far away from the station; nor in truth would there be any ground for such a supposition. All he had to do was to hurry back, to report himself at Aldershot in due course, to be as much shocked as other people when the news of the accident reached him, and to treat the events of the last half-hour as though they had never occurred. Was he not morally justified in adopting that plan? Was he not guiltless of his cousin's death?

"He tried his best to kill me," muttered Archie, "and I should have had a right to try and kill him in self-defence. But I didn't try, it was all his own doing, not mine."

Well, he had to make up his mind, for there were not many minutes to spare, and if he missed the train a second time, his fate must necessarily be decided for him. It seems hard to condemn a man placed, through no fault of his own, in so cruel a dilemma, for choosing to make himself safe. Yet he was wrong, and he lived to acknowledge it. Setting the moral aspect of the question aside, it would have been better for him to confess the truth and take all the consequences that might result than to carry about with him to his grave a secret which he could never dare to impart to any other human being. But at the time he naturally did not realise what the burden of that secret must be. He was horror-struck, but not remorseful (having no cause

for remorse), and as he hastened along the track, which he had lately traversed under such different conditions of feeling, his longing for escape found expression in the words which he kept repeating over and over:—

"Nobody will know! Nobody will know!"

CHAPTER XIX.

"DEATH BY MISADVENTURE."

EARLY in the morning Mrs. Allspice, the housekeeper at the Priory, had got through her daily task of rousing up heavy-headed housemaids, and was seated in her sanctum adding up accounts, when a tap on the window-pane made her jump.

"Drat the man!" she exclaimed irritably, when she recognised the face of old Coppard, "why can't he go to the back door, instead of stealing upon a body that way, like a thief in the night?" And, throwing open the window, she proceeded to administer the rating which the case appeared to call for.

"You'll excuse me, mum," said Coppard, in his deep, hoarse voice, "but I'm the bearer of bad noos, which had best be for your private hear. As I come along I thinks to myself, 'Mrs. Hallspice, she's a sensible 'oman with a powerful gift of self-control; I'll tell what must be told to Mrs. Hallspice, and keep out of the way o' them silly gals, as'ud go screeching all over the place and breakin' things violent 'stead of easy, like they should be broke.'"

Notwithstanding the self-control with which she

was credited, Mrs. Allspice pressed her hand to her heart and gasped.

"Mercy upon me!" she ejaculated. "Don't tell me it's Mr. Archie!"

Coppard shook his head but did not relax the solemnity of his expression.

"To the best o' my knowledge and belief, mum, there ain't nothin' amiss with the young gentleman as you speak of," he replied.

"The Lord be praised for that! Step in through the window, then, if the rheumatics 'll let you. You're right about those girls; they're just as inquisitive as they're flighty, and a stronger thing than that I couldn't say."

Coppard having hoisted himself into the room with rather more groaning and wheezing than was absolutely necessary (for he felt that he had a claim on Mrs. Allspice's famous cherry brandy, and he wanted to show her how much he needed it), proceeded to unfold his tale. As this was a very long business indeed and was adorned by numerous picturesque digressions, it may perhaps be summarised with advantage. The upshot of it was that, having pulled round to the Pebble Cove soon after daybreak to pick up his crab-pots, he had seen the body of a man lying on the beach, and that, after landing and making a closer inspection, he had discovered, to his horror, that this unfortunate was no other than Mr. Morton Bligh, stone dead, "and so knocked about and smashed as I won't distress your feelings by describing of it, mum." He had at once hastened to Abbotsport and had assembled a party, with whose help he had removed the corpse to the Seven Stars—"where

it now lays, mum. For I didn't venture not for to let 'em carry it up to the Priory, mum, till I got instructions. I couldn't feel as it ought to be done, mum—which I daresay you'll understand me."

Mrs. Allspice commended Coppard and gave him the cherry brandy which his soul loved. She was, of course, very much shocked and said so a great many times; but she was more impressed by the awful suddenness with which this sinner had been "called to his account" than afflicted by his demise. As to the manner in which the accident had come about she felt little doubt. Mr. Morton had been expected home on the previous evening, but his non-appearance had caused no alarm, because it was known that he was dining at Upton Chetwode, and as he had his portmanteau with him, it was supposed that he intended sleeping there. Evidently, if he had had such an intention, he must have abandoned it and started to walk home—possibly under circumstances which rendered walking in the neighbourhood of a cliff imprudent. Mrs. Allspice had reason to be aware that the circumstances alluded to not unfrequently presented themselves in Mr. Morton's case after dinner. But now the question was, who was to break the news to the Squire? And to such a question there could, in that house, be only one answer. It was, as Coppard said, "crool 'ard" upon Miss Cicely, but then she had courage enough for anything; "and besides-——" added Mrs. Allspice, caressing her double chin meditatively with her finger and thumb, and leaving her sentence unfinished.

The worthy housekeeper probably meant that it would be impossible for Miss Cicely to grieve very

deeply over the death of such a brother, but did not like to say so. Presently she sighed and went up to Cicely's bedroom, after telling old Coppard to stay where he was, and left the cherry brandy on the table —a thing which she never would have done if her mental balance had not been disturbed. When she returned at the end of a quarter of an hour she saw at once how her confidence had been abused, and placed a mental punishment mark against the delinquent's name; but the present occasion not being an appropriate one for letting him know what she thought of him, she contented herself with giving him a stern look, which he did not seem to comprehend, and telling him to go round to the front-door, where he would find Miss Cicely, who wished to see him.

Cicely was waiting on the lawn when Coppard emerged from the stable-yard, and she at once moved further away from the house, beckoning to him to follow her.

"I don't want the servants to know that you are here," she said, as he approached; "they would be sure to guess that something was wrong, and I haven't had time to consider yet how Papa is to be told. I am afraid it might do him a great deal of harm if he heard it without any preparation, or even if he suspected that a misfortune had happened and didn't know what it was. In whatever way he may learn it, it is certain to make him ill."

Her cheeks were very white, but her voice was steady and her manner composed. Possibly she might have displayed more emotion if she had only had her own feelings to think of; but as it was there was room

for nothing in her mind but dread of the effect of a sudden shock upon her father in his present frail condition. She made Coppard repeat all that she had already heard from the housekeeper, but while she seemed to be listening to the details of his prolix narrative she was in reality debating half a dozen ways of softening a blow which could not be softened, and finding objections to them all.

Coppard was still dilating upon the forethought and presence of mind which he had exhibited throughout this melancholy affair when the tall figure of Mr. Lowndes was seen hurrying up the avenue. Cicely advanced to meet him, glad to have found somebody with whom she could take counsel; for although it was not her habit to ask advice or accept it, she sometimes allowed herself to be guided by the Rector, whose sound common sense she appreciated.

"You have heard?" she said, interrogatively.

Mr. Lowndes made a sign of assent.

"I came up at once to see whether I could be of any use. Has your father been told?"

"Not yet; and I don't know how it is to be done. Even if he were quite well he would feel it a great deal more than—than——"

"Well, yes; I am afraid he would," agreed the Rector, who understood what she did not say.

"And he is not as strong as he was a month ago," continued Cicely, the tears suddenly coming into her eyes. "I have not been able to make up my mind to go to him; but I must not put it off any longer. Will you come with me?"

"Wouldn't it be almost better for me to go without

you?" suggested Mr. Lowndes. "I'll do just what you wish, but it seems to me that if I undertook the mission I might, in some ways, save both you and him pain."

Cicely assented gratefully. "How kind you are!" she exclaimed. She knew very well that there was nothing in the world more distasteful to this good-humoured, eupeptic man than the performance of duties which are commonly described as painful; but she allowed him, on this occasion, to assume a burden which by rights should have been laid upon her, because she felt sure that her father would be able to solace himself by speaking his mind freely to his old friend. All the circumstances of Morton's relations with his family had been so unusual that it would be hardly possible for them, in talking about him together, to give expression to their real feelings. So the Rector went into the house, and having ascertained that Mr. Bligh was up and dressed, gave his card, upon which he had scribbled, "I must see you for a few minutes," to the butler to take upstairs. Immediately afterwards he was shown into the presence of the invalid, whom he found lying on a sofa and finishing his breakfast.

"You're very early, and you look very solemn, Lowndes," remarked Mr. Bligh. "Has the church been burnt down? I hope so; because then it may be rebuilt. Heaven forbid that it should ever be restored!"

It often falls to the lot of a country parson to announce evil tidings, and, unless he is abnormally stupid, experience soon teaches him which method of doing so to select in a particular case, out of the very few methods that exist. Mr. Lowndes simply said:—

"I have come to tell you that Morton fell over the cliff on his way back from Upton Chetwode last night and was killed on the spot."

He was perhaps right in judging that an abrupt shock would do his friend less harm than a process of slow torture, but he was hardly prepared for the agitation against which Mr. Bligh struggled vainly for several minutes; because, to tell the truth, he had not believed that any father could feel a spark of affection for so worthless and undutiful a son.

"I am afraid I have been very clumsy," he said at length, rising and laying his hand on the sick man's shoulder. "I did it for the best."

Mr. Bligh nodded and presently found his voice. In answer to the few questions that he put he was told all that was known about an accident the immediate cause of which it was easy to surmise; but it was a long time before he could talk as Cicely had foreseen that it would be a relief to him to talk.

"I feel like a murderer, Lowndes," he said at length. "I never wished for poor Morton's death, but I did look forward to it as an event not unlikely to happen and not likely to be deplored. Now it has happened sooner than I expected, and I see, as one always does when it is too late to make amends, that I was not fair to him."

"My dear Bligh, that is nonsense. You were not only fair to him but generous. Let us say, if you will, that death wipes out all offences; but so long as a man lives his offences must be remembered and taken into account. As a matter of fact, you forgave Morton's

while he was still alive and had every prospect of living for many years."

"Oh, I made him my heir; I should have been conspicuously unfair if I hadn't. But that is not quite what I mean. I never spoke kindly to him or showed or felt the slightest sympathy for him. I just tolerated him. He was treated like a leper, whom we only admitted amongst us because we were so sure that his leprosy was not catching. It was the wrong way to go to work. One should either forgive without reserve or not at all."

"Most people wouldn't have forgiven him at all," the Rector declared; "and though I wish to be as charitable as I can, I am bound to say that I don't believe kindness would have had any good effect upon him."

"Ah, well! it's useless to discuss the question now. I think Archie ought to come back; no doubt his colonel will give him leave. Perhaps Cicely will write him a line."

"Yes; or for that matter it would be easy enough to telegraph."

"No; I don't want him telegraphed for. If he is here the day after to-morrow that will be quite time enough in my opinion; but Cicely can do as she likes about it. There will have to be an inquest, I suppose?"

"That is unavoidable, I am afraid," answered the Rector; "but it will be a mere matter of form and your presence will not be required."

He remained for some time longer with Mr. Bligh and only took his leave when Cicely, whose anxiety could endure no further delay, came in. Cicely's first

impression on seeing her father's face was that a delicate operation had been skilfully performed, and she threw a quick glance of gratitude at her emissary, who nevertheless went away sorrowful.

"I don't like it," thought the good man to himself, as he descended the staircase. "I don't like it a bit. I only hope that this may not be his death-blow; but it wouldn't surprise me if he never rallied. He wasn't in the least like himself from beginning to end—too much moved at first and too apathetic afterwards. One doesn't require a doctor to tell one what that means; the disease is reaching the brain."

Cicely, as was only to be expected, formed a less gloomy prognosis. She could not shut her eyes to the hopeless nature of her father's illness, but she had managed to shut them to the fact that he was growing slowly and steadily worse, and now she managed to ignore symptoms which in the case of any other sick person would not have escaped her. In the afternoon Mark Chetwode called to make inquiries, and she saw him for a few minutes, wishing to hear anything that could be learnt from the last man who was known to have seen Morton alive.

Naturally he did not tell her much. His face, which he could always and without effort render expressionless, concealed any emotion that he may have felt. Only once in the course of the brief interview did a slight change come over it, and that was when, in reply to his request that he might be allowed to be of some use to her, since her father was incapacitated, she said:—

"Oh, thank you, but I hope Archie will be here to-morrow or next day. I am going to write to him."

He did not congratulate her upon her engagement, thinking that it would be a breach of good manners to allude to an event which had not yet been formally made public, and as he had no excuse for lingering where his presence was something of an intrusion, he soon went away in a very despondent mood.

"This closes the chapter, then," thought he. "If my case was hopeless yesterday, it is doubly hopeless to-day. So far as I am concerned, the entire Bligh family died when that miserable creature broke his neck. I only wish I could forget them as easily as I shall be able to forget him!"

As a matter of fact, however, he was not able to forget Morton very readily; for he was reminded of his deceased guest in a disagreeable manner when he was called upon to give evidence at the coroner's inquest. That court of inquiry, which was held at the Seven Stars, treated him with scant consideration, and the reluctance which he evinced in answering certain questions was not appreciated as it might have been. Asked in what condition the deceased had left his house, he began by replying that the deceased had left his house sound in wind and limb. This was considered flippant and evasive, and he was very soon made to confess that during the evening Mr. Morton Bligh had drunk a good deal of wine and spirits.

"Was he sober when he started to walk home?"

"Well, that depends upon what you call sober. He could walk."

"Could he walk straight without assistance?"

"I am not prepared to affirm that he could walk absolutely straight; he appeared to me to keep a relatively straight course."

"And knowing, as you must have known, the danger that lay before him, it did not occur to you to walk with him?"

"It did not. I foresaw no special danger."

These answers created a very bad impression, and at the last of them the jurymen, with one consent, wagged their heads solemnly. They were all Abbotsport men, which is as much as to say that they were acquainted with the physical disabilities under which the deceased had laboured at the time of his demise, and could heartily sympathise with them. It might, they thought (though this, after all, was a moot point), be wrong to get drunk, but as for asking a man to drink with you and neglecting to see him home after your drink had overpowered him, there could be no two opinions about such conduct as that. Indeed, it was afterwards said that several of them had been strongly in favour of finding the delinquent guilty of manslaughter, and had only been brought to do violence to their sense of what was right by representations that the man was no better than a foreigner. It was, at all events, a considerable time before they could agree upon a verdict of "Death by Misadventure," to which the following expression of opinion was added:—

"The jury desire to record their great astonishment and regret that no reasonable and humane precautions were taken by the gentleman with whom the deceased had been dining to avert a calamity which might have been predicted."

The admirable and well-chosen terms in which this rider was couched were generally considered to reflect great credit upon Mr. Simpkins, the foreman, but old Coppard, who, as may be remembered, had a private grudge against Simpkins, said that, by his way of thinking, the jury would have done better to mind their own business and keep their astonishment and regret to themselves.

"These things comes to pass by the will of the Almighty," was his pious comment. "Drunk or sober, when a man's hour comes he's got to die. Regretted or not regretted, the young Squire's dead, and I don't see as it'll do him no manner o' good to throw nasty dictionary words at the livin'."

Much the same, though otherwise worded, were the sentiments of Mr. Lowndes, who caught Mark up in the street and made him a sort of apology.

"Stupid fellows! They had no business to say such things even if they thought them. Bligh will be very much vexed when he hears. I hope you won't let it distress you."

"Distress me! Why should it distress me?" returned Mark. "Is it possible that in England you really care what these boors may say or think about you? At an election time I understand that they may become important, since you have chosen to make them your masters, but even at an election time you must surely be laughing at them, unless you feel the absurdity of the position too much to laugh. As for me, an English peasant is no more to me than a Russian moujik; I should be ashamed of myself if such beings had the power to cause me emotion of any kind."

He spoke with a warmth which left the worthy Rector open-mouthed, and which seemed to betray a good deal of the emotion which he disclaimed. But in truth the verdict of the coroner's jury had not ruffled him. What he felt, and what had caused him to turn so sharply upon innocent Mr. Lowndes, was blind rage against fate and deep disgust for the scene of his discomfiture. He had now quite made up his mind that he would leave the neighbourhood and never return. He was not so poor but that life—a kind of life—would still be possible for him elsewhere. "Rather a single room in St. Petersburg than a castle in this accursed province!" he muttered, as he strode up the hill towards lonely Upton Chetwode.

CHAPTER XX.

ARCHIE RETURNS.

"Why, Bligh, old man, what have you been doing to yourself? You look as if you had just had a bout of jungle fever!" was the remark with which one of his brother officers greeted Archie when he reached Aldershot.

And the others followed suit. They said it was all very well for him to pretend that he had been leading a quiet life down in the country, but that wouldn't do. "Too much London is your complaint, my boy," declared these knowing fellows; and he only contradicted them in a half-hearted sort of way, being conscious of his haggard appearance and feeling that it must be accounted for somehow or other. He admitted that he was wretchedly seedy, which was in fact the truth, and he added that he didn't know why, which was a somewhat less veracious statement. About his engagement he said not a word; for in this dreadful misfortune which had overtaken him he could feel certain of nothing. It seemed as if trouble in some shape must come of it—as if the secret which had already, in his mind, raised a barrier between him and the girl whom he loved must keep them apart for ever; though of course there was no reason why it should, so long as he kept his own counsel. There was, too, the possibility

—a very remote one, no doubt, but still a possibility—that the truth might be discovered; and all day long he kept thinking of this, remembering how clear the night had been and how exposed the spot on which the fatal encounter had taken place. A coast-guardsman in the distance might well have seen it all.

Poor Archie had many days of unhappiness before him, but he afterwards thought of that first day as the most unhappy and the most interminable of his whole life. He had a certain amount of duty to do, which filled up a portion of it, but during the remainder he was in a state of almost intolerable suspense and misery, trying most unsuccessfully to be like himself, knowing how necessary it was that he should show no signs of mental distress, and expecting every moment to receive a telegram which never came. There was very little rest for him that night. Instead of sleeping, he tossed about upon his bed and tormented himself with conjectures. That he would be communicated with as soon as the catastrophe became known he felt certain; he could only suppose that Morton's body had not been found.

But when the newspapers arrived the next morning that surmise was proved to be incorrect. It was the Coloniel who handed him a copy of the *Times*, saying, "I'm afraid this must refer to one of your people, Bligh." And there, sure enough, was a paragraph headed "*Fatal Fall from a Cliff*," in which it was narrated how Morton Bligh, the only son of Mr. Bligh of the Priory, Abbotsport, had met with his death in a shockingly sudden manner, while walking home at night from the house of a neighbour.

"I suppose you would like to go to your uncle? There will be no difficulty about that," said the Colonel, looking kindly at the young fellow, whose evident agitation seemed only natural under the circumstances; and Archie murmured a few words of thanks.

He thought he had better telegraph to the Priory first; but before he had time to do so the second post brought him a letter from Cicely which rendered that unnecessary. The letter, written apparently in haste and in a somewhat tremulous hand, gave a very brief account of the fatality which had occurred, and begged Archie to ask for leave and return as soon as possible.

"I would have telegraphed for you," Cicely wrote, "but Papa did not wish it; he only thought you ought to be here for the funeral. He has been very much upset, as you may imagine, and of course his health has suffered; but I do hope and trust that he will be better in a day or two." Of her own feelings she scarcely spoke: evidently her mind was filled with anxiety for her father and could at present hold no other emotion.

It was with a heavy heart that Archie seated himself in the train that afternoon. He was not a man to whom dissimulation came easily, and in his short, sunny life he had had so very little experience of trouble that he could not put it away from him, as less fortunate people learn perforce to do. The more he thought of it the more impossible it seemed to him that he could meet Cicely's eyes without being detected. How would he ever be able to affect the horror and consternation that would be expected of him? How could he get through the horrible duty of following to the grave the

body of the man whom he had killed? It was useless to say to himself that he had not really killed Morton, that he had been guilty of no crime. That was true; and if, immediately after the event, he had had the courage to say so openly, he might possibly have been believed; but by evasion he had made himself guilty of the crime—guilty, at any rate, in the eyes of all who might subsequently hear of it, perhaps even of his own. He had chosen to act as a murderer would have acted, and what he had done could never be undone now. So early as this he had reached the point which nothing could have saved him from reaching sooner or later—the point of regretting that he had run away, instead of facing danger. The poor fellow was naturally brave and honest, which made his plight the more pitiable. "Perhaps I shall get accustomed to it," he groaned at last. That was the only consolation which he could offer to himself, and he had not the advantage of being able to believe in it.

At Abbotsport Road another passenger alighted, to whom the footman from the Priory touched his hat. This little grizzle-headed man bustled out of the station in front of Archie and glanced round at him inquiringly, with his foot on the step of the carriage, which was waiting.

"Oh, Mr. Bligh, I think?" said he. "Let me introduce myself. My name is Parsons; I have been sent for to see your uncle."

"I hope that doesn't mean that he is worse," said Archie, to whom the famous physician was well known by repute.

"Well, I hope not," answered Sir Peter, when they

had taken their places in the carriage; "but to a man in his state mental disturbance cannot be otherwise than dangerous, and his daughter is frightened about him. Naturally enough, poor girl! This is a sad business!"

"Yes," agreed Archie, trying to say something more, but finding that the words stuck in his throat.

"Yes, a great shock to your uncle, no doubt; although, as of course you know, his son was not all that he could have wished."

"I don't think Morton could be called a good son," Archie managed to say.

Sir Peter shook his head.

"A bad fellow, I'm afraid, if the truth is to be spoken. He made himself notorious in many ways, and none of them pleasant ways. Still, when a man loses his only son it comes upon him as a blow, whatever the son may have been worth; and there is always something awful about a sudden death, though I daresay most of us would prefer to die suddenly, if we could choose."

After this there was a pause, during which the physician may have been reflecting that the prospects of the young man beside him had probably undergone a great change for the better in consequence of his cousin's death; for his next remark was:—

"Your uncle's estates are entailed, I presume?"

"No; he can do what he likes with them," answered Archie, and added, "but I hope he may enjoy them himself for a long time to come."

"Hope does no harm," said Sir Peter; "I am not going to extinguish Miss Bligh's hopes unless she compels

me to do it. But her father is well aware that his disease is incurable, and if you do not know it, I think it is better that I should tell you so."

"But you don't consider him in immediate danger, do you?" asked Archie.

"I did not when I saw him last; this affair may have hastened what is ordinarily a slow process, though. And so his daughter will get the property, I suppose. Poor child! it isn't an enviable fate to be a great heiress. And there will be nobody to take care of her except the old aunt, who didn't strike me as a very efficient person."

Archie was very nearly saying that there would be somebody else, but held his peace. He could not shake off the impression that something undefinable had separated him from Cicely, and it was a relief to him to think that their first meeting must take place in the presence of this stranger.

The meeting, in fact, passed off without any painful incident. Cicely greeted him affectionately and seemed to be glad that he had come, but it was plain that she was far less preoccupied with her lover than with Sir Peter Parsons, whom she followed upstairs. Archie went into the library, where he found Miss Skipwith squeezing a damp handkerchief in her trembling fingers. The poor woman, whom Sir Peter was not alone in deeming inefficient, had been completely set on one side for two days, and, having nothing to do, had fretted herself into a state of nervous excitement which made even Archie's company welcome to her.

"Yes," she said in answer to his first question, "I am afraid Wilfrid is worse. From what his servant told

me, he must have had something like a seizure in the night, and though he seemed to have rallied this morning, Cicely was dreadfully alarmed and insisted upon telegraphing for Sir Peter. How terrible it all is? I suppose I am very wicked, but I can't help feeling that Morton has always done everything that could be done to break his father's heart—even in his death."

"His death, at least, was not intentional," observed Archie, with a queer, incongruous inclination to burst out laughing.

"No, but the circumstances which caused it were, and they were so disgraceful, and everybody knows them! There is no doubt that he was intoxicated when he left Upton Chetwode, and I have just heard that the coroner's jury have brought in a verdict reflecting upon Mr. Chetwode for having allowed him to walk away in that state. It is very cruel of them to say such things, I think."

Archie made no reply. Everything appeared to have fallen out in accordance with his anticipations. He was sorry that anything disagreeable should have been said about Mark, but not sure that that gentleman had not deserved it. Ah, if only Morton had been prevented from starting on that fatal walk! He sat listening half unconsciously to the lamentations of Miss Skipwith, until the door opened and Cicely came in, looking less anxious than she had done on his arrival.

"Sir Peter has relieved my mind," she said; "I daresay I was too ready to take fright. He says he would like to see you for a minute before he goes," she added turning to Archie; "you will find him in the hall. He is in a hurry to get back to London and

thinks he will just catch the up-train if he starts at once."

Archie went out, and meeting Sir Peter at the foot of the staircase, said:—

"I am glad to hear that you could give a favourable report."

But Sir Peter shook his head.

"Well, relatively favourable," he answered. "I think Mr. Bligh has pulled through what might have proved to be the last stage of his illness, and it is very possible that he may now linger on for many months. On the other hand he may take a turn for the worse at any moment. I found him a good deal depressed, but he told me that his affairs were in order and that he was easy in his mind about his daughter's future—which is a comfort to him." Here the doctor glanced at Archie and smiled. "You must allow me to congratulate you," he added. "I rejoice for the young lady's sake as well as for yours."

Then he consulted his watch, shook hands hurriedly and ran out to the carriage.

Archie returned to the library with as cheerful a countenance as he could assume, but found only Miss Skipwith there.

"Cicely begs you to excuse her till to-morrow," the old lady said. "Her father likes to have her near him; and besides, she has borne up so bravely all this time that she is beginning to feel the reaction. Perhaps you will not mind dining alone to-night. I have no appetite, and I think I would rather go to my own room." Miss Skipwith hesitated for a moment, then resumed in a lowered voice:—"I am afraid there are a good many

painful duties which must devolve upon you. The—the remains are to be transferred here to-night, I understand, and no doubt arrangements will have to be made and directions given. Mr. Lowndes kindly offered to help us, but perhaps, now that you have come, we ought not to trouble him."

"I am sure I shall only be too glad to spare Cicely and Uncle Wilfrid in any way that I can," answered the young man; and in truth he was glad to be provided with occupation, ghastly though that occupation necessarily appeared to him. There was a horrible irony in the fate which compelled him to receive Morton's body and give orders for its burial; yet he dreaded that less than the inevitable conversation with Cicely which he foresaw, and the postponement of which was a respite to him.

Late that night, however, when he had done all that had to be done, and was sitting in the smoking-room with his head on his hands, Cicely stole in for a minute to thank him.

"You have been very kind and good," said she; "and now, Archie, there is one thing I want to suggest; let us never mention Morton again if we can help it. I didn't love him, nor did you; we can't pretend that we did. But we can be silent about him, and—and remember that it isn't for us to judge him any more now."

"Yes, that will be best," cried the young fellow eagerly, for it seemed to him that he was being offered the nearest approach that could be obtained to that obliteration of the past for which he longed so despairingly—"that will be much the best! We'll—we'll try to forget it all, won't we?"

CHAPTER XXI.

COPPARD'S CONJECTURES.

It cannot be a very common experience to act as chief mourner to a man who has died by your hand, and certainly it cannot be a very agreeable one. Archie, however, representing his uncle, who was unable to attend the funeral, got through it somehow or other, and his pale face and downcast looks were noticed only with approval. Everybody now knew (because Mrs. Lowndes had taken care to inform everybody) that he was engaged to be married to his cousin, and that consequently he would at no distant date be *de facto* if not *de jure* owner of the Bligh estates and the large Bligh fortune; so that if he could contrive to be really sorry for the death of the disreputable person whose removal opened up such a fine future for him, he must be an uncommonly kind-hearted fellow.

Notwithstanding Mr. Bligh's wish that the funeral should be as quiet and simple a ceremony as possible, it was rendered imposing by a great assemblage of neighbours, whose presence must have been due to some other motive than respect for the deceased. Out of the corner of his eye Archie saw them all, and was distressed by an altogether mistaken idea that they were looking askance at him. After the last words of the solemn service had been read, he had to shake hands

with a good many of them, to listen to their conventional expressions of sympathy with his uncle, and to hear each of them in turn exclaim, "Shocking thing!" Sir George Dare, whose countenance was habitually adorned by a broad smile, assumed an air of gravity which was irresistibly comical while uttering the prescribed formula, but allowed his features to relax into their normal set when he whispered in Archie's ear:—

"Lucky dog! I've heard all about it. You mustn't mind my saying that I should have preferred somebody else whom I could name to be in your shoes. Wish you joy all the same you know!"

Well, this was comforting and kindly meant, and Mr. Lowndes, who presently issued from the vestry door, was even more warm in his felicitations, declaring that the match was one upon which he had long set his heart, and that he knew it would bring great happiness to others besides the young couple. But in spite of what he had said to Cicely, the night before, about oblivion, Archie could not free himself from the weight of care which oppressed him, and he was thankful to get back to the Priory and hide himself in the smoking-room and be alone. But he had not been alone five minutes when the butler came in to say that Mr. Bligh wished to see him, and of course he could not disobey the summons.

Mr. Bligh had been moved downstairs and was in the library again. He looked much as usual, Archie thought—perhaps a little feebler—but when he began to speak there was a noticeable change in his voice,

and every now and then he seemed to have a certain difficulty of articulation.

He said:—

"Well, my dear fellow, this is a sad house to have brought you back to. Among the dead and the dying it is hard to keep up one's spirits. Aldershot would be more tolerable, wouldn't it?"

"I'd rather be here," Archie answered.

"For some reasons I suppose you would. Are those reasons powerful enough to keep you here, do you think?"

He looked almost pleadingly at the young man, who replied in some surprise:—

"Of course, I should like to stay as long as they'll let me."

"That would hardly be more than a week, would it? I am going to ask a favour of you, Archie: I want you to send in your papers at once. Of course, you will wish to return to your regiment for a few days and say good-bye to your old friends and so forth, but if you and the authorities could be satisfied with that much I should be glad. You see you are rather badly wanted here and may at any time be still more wanted. After all, it would be only hastening your retirement by a month or two."

Archie signified his entire willingness to do as he was requested. Any renewal of the old, thoughtless, happy-go-lucky life which he had been used to lead in the regiment would, he felt, be impossible, and assuredly no house which contained Cicely could ever be dull or sad for him.

This latter consideration he mentioned to his uncle, who smiled and said:—

"That's as may be. At your age nature demands some outlet for latent energy, and philandering, though pleasant, doesn't quite meet the want. However, it might be supplied, perhaps, if you were inclined to relieve me of some of the duties that I can't perform any longer. Managing another man's estate is a shade less interesting than managing your own, but it is, and will be, so very nearly your own that I should think you might see to things with almost all the zest of proprietorship." Mr. Bligh was silent for a moment or two before he added, "I cannot quite make up my mind yet whether I will execute a fresh will or not. As matters now stand, Cicely will inherit everything, except the sum which I always intended you to have. Possibly it would be wiser to make you my heir; because authority ought to belong to the husband, not to the wife, generally speaking."

"It would come to exactly the same thing," said Archie.

"Oh, dear, no; it wouldn't come to the same thing at all. But there are advantages and disadvantages in both courses. I must weigh them a little longer, I think. The future, you see," continued Mr. Bligh, musingly, "is always uncertain and is very seldom what one expects it to be."

Perhaps it was some vague apprehension suggested by these words, or perhaps it was the extreme repugnance which he felt to the idea of becoming enriched by Morton's death, that made Archie answer hastily:—

"I hope you won't dream of disinheriting Cicely in

my favour. I don't think she would like it, and I know I should hate it. As for authority, I hope there will never be any question of that between us. Whatever she wishes I am sure to wish; and even if I didn't, I should try to make her think that I did."

Against such youthful and Arcadian notions of matrimonial existence it was hardly worth while to contend. Mr. Bligh, with a half-amused, half sad glance at his nephew, only said:—

"Well, I take note of your objection. Thank you for giving in to me about your retirement from the army, and also for helping us through these dark days as you have done. Now I think I must dismiss you: I can't talk or listen long without getting confused."

From that time forth Archie's life began to move along the lines which seemed destined to guide it through a long vista of happy years to its close. Those lines, to all outward appearance, were fallen to him in pleasant places, and were, in truth, such as he would have chosen in preference to any others; for he loved the country, and the kind of work which his uncle now handed over to him was just that which suited his tastes. But the heart knoweth its own bitterness. To talk about forgetting was ridiculous; he might as well have attempted to forget a toothache. He was a changed man, and he knew that he was changed, and he feared that others must know it too. Sometimes Cicely looked at him in a surprised, inquiring way which tortured him. Did she suspect anything? Would she ever suspect? He brooded over such thoughts until he almost felt as if discovery would be better than suspicion.

In reality Cicely noticed nothing more than that he was depressed at times, and that did not strike her as surprising. Of course it must be dull for him to be buried down in the country at that season of the year, with two women and an invalid, and of course a house of mourning cannot very well be made cheerful. She thought him very good and uncomplaining, and when she was not with her father (but of late she had been nervously unwilling to leave her father for long) she did her best to amuse him. In that way they had some rides and walks together, which raised his spirits for the time being and increased his adoration for his betrothed. She never said anything now about not being in love with him; so that he had moments of joyful hope which were perhaps as little justified as his fears.

The latter, however, predominated, and it did not take much to rouse them into full activity. One afternoon, for example, he was terribly scared by certain remarks of old Coppard's, whom he encountered in the main street of Abbotsport and who stopped to speak to him. Coppard might have been drinking rather more than was good for him, and indeed Archie was pretty sure that he had; but that did not account for the man's disquieting and suggestive manner. For he pulled up in the middle of the street, with his hands in his pockets and his legs very wide apart, as though he did not intend the other to escape him, and fixing a steady, peculiar stare—surely it was a peculiar stare—upon Archie's face, began at once to talk about the recent catastrophe.

"'Twas a cur'ous thing to happen, look at it what

way you will, sir," said he. "*I* can't account for it to my satisfaction, nohow. Come to consider the evidence and put this and that together, it do seem strange. Intossicated with liquor I make no doubt he were, poor gentleman; but then, says I to myself, if a man could keep his legs all that distance, what could ever ha' made him lose 'em in the one spot where he was sartin sure for to kill hisself if he fell? 'Misadwentur' says the crowner's jury; and no fools they, if they'd ha' stopped at that! Misadwentur is a word as covers a power o' meanin's."

"What meaning do you want to give to it?" asked Archie, turning pale. "Are you suggesting that my cousin committed suicide?"

"I don't suggest nothin' at all, sir," answered Coppard; "I wouldn't make so free. I on'y merely says I can't account for it—not to my own satisfaction. Don't know whether it strikes you as it does me, sir, but by my way o' thinkin' intossication don't explain it."

"The Coroner's jury appear to have thought that a sufficient explanation," observed Archie.

"So they do, sir, and nobody can't blame 'em, with the little evidence they had to go upon. But it's like this, do you see, sir? A man is found dead at the bottom of a cliff. How did he come there? Well, you has to take your choice of three ways"—and Coppard solemnly checked them off on the tips of his big, blunt fingers—"there's accident, there's sooicide, and there's foul play. Now I've been over the ground up top o' the cliff very careful, and I've seen traces o' what look to me uncommon like a struggle."

"Why didn't you say so before, then?" asked Archie,

who now felt almost sure that Coppard suspected him. "Don't you know that it was your duty to state everything that could throw light upon the affair?"

"Never heerd tell on it, sir," answered Coppard. "My dooty, as I was given to understand, was to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothin' but the truth. Now, I couldn't ha' swore as a struggle had took place. Not by no means. Let alone as I'd sooner perjure myself than I'd distress Miss Cicely. With you 'tis different, sir. The young squire, he worn't your brother, nor yet you and he worn't particular good friends, I b'lieve. Whether he come by his death this way or that don't make no great odds to you."

Archie's throat felt dry and parched. He could not speak, but stood, with knitted brows, gazing at the old fisherman, who presently resumed:—

"Beggin' of your pardon, sir, is it true what I've heerd tell—that you and Miss Cicely is to be man and wife?"

"Yes," answered Archie shortly, "it is true."

"Then I hain't got no more to say, sir. I wouldn't have Miss Cicely worrited, not if 'twas ever so. If it had been only you as was consarned I don't know but what I might ha' spoke my mind more free; but worritin' you will mean worritin' she now, I reckon."

"You'll be good enough to speak your mind here and now," returned Archie, with a sudden rush of anger. "You are making insinuations which I don't understand and won't submit to. Do you accuse me of having caused my cousin's death?"

"Lord save us, sir!" exclaimed Coppard, with uplifted hands, "what an awful thing to say! No, sir;

what I was thinkin' of—since you horder me to speak out—was this. It come to my hearin' as you missed your train that there night, and was walkin' about the country for a matter of two hours, waitin' for the next one. Now, thinks I, we knows from Mr. Chetwode as the haccident occurred most probable betwixt eleven and twelve o'clock, and if so be as there *was* foul play, and that young gentleman was anywhere in the neighbourhood, why, he might ha' seen somebody, or heerd somethin', thinks I."

"I neither heard nor saw anything," answered Archie, telling this first direct lie with a sickening sense of self-contempt; although, to be sure, it is no worse to tell lies than to act them.

"You did not, sir? Well, so much the better, maybe. We can't bring back the dead, and I shouldn't ha' named this to you, sir—for I see it's put you about—without you'd pressed me to it. Henceforward I shall keep my mouth shut, sir, you may depend."

Archie paused irresolutely. That Coppard had spoken out all that was in his mind he did not believe; yet would it be prudent to push him farther? The man could not *know* anything, could not prove anything. His momentary flash of wrath had expired, and he now once more felt wretched, frightened, degraded, anxious chiefly to close the interview and get away. Should he tip Coppard, or would that look too much like paying hush-money? Finally he decided to say: —

"Well, my man, I think you can't do better than keep your mouth shut if you have nothing more than a very doubtful sort of conjecture to bring forward. But of course you can do just as you please about it. Here's

half-a-crown for you; I wouldn't spend it in drink if I were you."

There was no harm, surely, in so small a donation as that; one doesn't buy secrecy with half-a-crown.

Coppard, at any rate, did not seem to regard it in the light of a bribe. He touched his hat, pocketed the coin and said reproachfully:—

"Drink, sir? 'Tis little enough o' that us poor fellows gets! What I shall spend this here on is bread—bread for my missus and the young 'uns, as wants it badly."

"Well, I hope you'll be as good as your word," said Archie, turning away.

When he had time to collect his ideas he perceived that he had been far too easily frightened, and also that if he could not control himself better he would infallibly betray his secret ere long.

"It comes to this," he muttered, "that I must either learn to tell lies without wincing or throw up the sponge at once. Why haven't I got a face like that fellow Chetwode's? The fact is that I can't really be in danger from anybody except myself."

That he had already fallen into one stupid blunder he had been reminded by Coppard's observations; he ought certainly to have mentioned the circumstance of his having missed his train on the night of Morton's death. Why he had neglected to do so he hardly knew, except that he had shrunk from any allusion to that terrible evening; but he now saw that the omission must be repaired as soon as possible, and he took the first opportunity that offered of saying carelessly to Cicely:—

"By-the-way, I never told you that you were right about my having run things too fine when I left here for Aldershot. I reached the station just in time to see the train go out, and I had to wait for the 12.15."

"Oh, did you? How very tiresome for you!" she exclaimed. "What did you do with yourself all that time?"

"I walked about. It was a fine night, you know."

She gave a little shiver.

"Oh yes; it was *that* night, of course." And then after a pause, during which Archie's heart began to thump:—"If only you had walked as far as the Upton Chetwode path! But we won't think about that."

She was in truth quite as desirous of avoiding the subject as he could be, and neither then nor at any subsequent time did it occur to her to put this and that together after the manner of Coppard. Her one great anxiety in those days was to devise some means of raising her father's spirits, which were painfully depressed, and next to that she wanted to cheer up Archie, who also seemed to be in need of some one to cheer him up. If she was successful in neither case she was scarcely conscious of her failure; for both men loved her so much that the mere fact of seeing her was their greatest pleasure in life, and gave them a fictitious air of light-heartedness while she was near.

Archie, as has been said, was really light-hearted by fits and starts; and as the days grew longer and warmer, and summer set in in earnest, he began—without knowing it perhaps—to derive that sort of enjoyment from existence which sunshine and the voices of Nature bring to those whose minds are ill at ease.

When a man of his age longs above all things for peace it may be assumed that he is in a bad way; but at any rate no place could be better adapted than Abbotsport for the satisfaction of such longings. After a time he went for a day or two to Aldershot, as his uncle had suggested that he should do, took leave of his old comrades, made the usual valedictory addition to the regimental plate and took a final part in the horse-play which he had found so delightful in days gone by. The change did him good, but he was glad to get back to the Priory again, and he told Cicely that he didn't think he should ever care to leave home for long after they were married.

"That is fortunate," she answered; "for I am quite sure that I shall not."

But Miss Skipwith, who chanced to overhear this expression of community of tastes, shook her head, for she had never contrived to banish the idea that Archie was more in love with the Priory than with his cousin.

"It will end badly. When people love one another they don't care where they live," was the old lady's muttered comment upon the fragment of dialogue which had reached her ears.

CHAPTER XXII.

VICTOR REAPPEARS.

DURING most London seasons there is one particular person who is a novelty and a success. The success, no doubt, is usually dependent and consequent upon the novelty, and those who in the course of one year have enjoyed the unstinted hospitality, kindness and flattery of the British capital will do well to betake themselves elsewhere the next, lest they be painfully reminded of the instability of men and things. While it lasts, however, that kind of popularity is probably pleasant to everybody, and it was certainly very pleasant to Madame Souravieff, who prided herself upon her social gifts.

These, it must be admitted, were considerably above the average, and as she appeared to have plenty of money and had been taken up at the outset by certain distinguished people, she had little difficulty in securing a general appreciation of them. Then, too, it was known that she was a political something-or-other—perhaps a Nihilist, perhaps a paid or honorary agent of the Russian Government, it did not much matter which—and that of course lent an additional interest to her ways and manners. Such was the exoteric view of her, and it had the effect of earning for her more invitations to dinners and balls than she could possibly accept.

But in the political world there were not wanting individuals who took her with a seriousness which would have amused her husband immensely. Grave statesmen listened with courtesy and attention to her persuasive eloquence; some of them (for she was really a very pretty woman, and her talk was almost as pretty as her face) even went the length of saying that they agreed with her to a great extent, and deplored, as she did, the ignorant obstinacy and obstinate ignorance of public opinion in this country. Moreover, she accomplished the complete subjugation of a newspaper editor, whom she asked to dinner repeatedly, and who was so won over by her fascinations or her arguments that he began writing leading articles upon the Eastern question which caused the constant reader to rub his eyes in stupefaction. Other editors, who perhaps had stuffed wax into their ears and had resisted the wiles of the siren, exposed in scathing terms the folly of this most unpatriotic man; for upwards of a fortnight a heated controversy raged between Russophiles and Russophobes, and hints of the existence of feminine influence were printed in language plain enough to be understanded of the people. All of which served to enhance Madame Souravieff's reputation.

In short, she amused herself very well indeed, and was so busy that she had less time than usual for writing letters to Mark Chetwode and reading his replies. Otherwise she might possibly have noticed a gradual and suspicious change in the tone of his remarks about Miss Bligh. He was very cautious, he did not say much, but then he left a good deal unsaid, and though he still wrote as if this project of marrying him to the

heiress was one for which his correspondent alone was responsible, there were signs that it had ceased to be in any way disagreeable to him. The Russian lady, however, was not alarmed. She had formed a mental picture of Cicely, in which that young lady figured as a simple rustic maiden who must be moulded and directed and made use of, but who should certainly be treated with all kindness and consideration. Mark, no doubt, would be bored by her at times; but Mark was chivalrous, he would make an excellent husband, as husbands go, and he would always remember that he was indebted to his wife's fortune for the prominent political position which he would assuredly acquire sooner or later.

When Madame Souravieff heard the news of Morton's sudden death and realised that the so-called heiress would now become an heiress indeed she rejoiced with a joy which, to give her her due, was almost entirely unselfish. She wrote a letter of hearty congratulation to Mark, from whom, in the course of a day or two, she received a very laconic reply.

"I have been preserved from exhibiting any indecent glee over the event which affords you so much satisfaction," he wrote, "because it does not, and never will, affect my destiny in the smallest degree. Irresistible as I am, Miss Bligh has managed to resist me. She is engaged to be married to her cousin, the young officer of cavalry, and I see myself condemned to celibacy, and to perpetual poverty, which is perhaps worse. For reasons which I need not specify, I have lately been cutting down a good many of my trees; but I dare say

there still remains one with a bough solid enough for me to hang myself upon."

Madame Souravieff was much vexed. To accept a defeat was never agreeable to her, and Mark's supineness in the presence of adverse circumstances had often before this caused her irritation.

"He is insupportable," she muttered impatiently. "He gives in without a struggle; and how is one to help him, if he will not help himself? An engagement—bah! What are engagements in England? They have no force, no family sanction; they are made and broken every day. This one must be broken."

And straightway she despatched to Upton Chetwode peremptory instructions to that effect.

These apparently remained without result. For several weeks she had not so much as a line from Mark, and she was growing seriously uneasy about him when, one evening, she encountered for the second time the little lawyer who had asked to be introduced to her at Lord Queensferry's soon after her arrival in London. Mr. Wingfield bowed over his folded hands and recalled himself to the lady's recollection. She smiled and extended her hand to him amiably; for it was her rule to be amiable to everybody, added to which she thought that this man of law might have had some recent news of his client.

Her surmise proved to be correct. Mr. Wingfield had heard that very morning from Mark, who was desperately eager to quit the neighbourhood of Abbotsport, and was willing to let his house at a nominal rent to anybody who could be induced to relieve him of the expense of keeping it up.

"I told him that I myself might very likely take his house at the end of the season," remarked Madame Souravieff. "Is it inhabitable, his house?"

"Well—it is inhabited," answered the lawyer, with a smile.

"At all events, it could soon be made inhabitable, I have no doubt. And so he is anxious to run away? That is very foolish of him in my opinion. What do you think?"

Mr. Wingfield was at first not very willing to say what he thought; but after he had been talked to with engaging candour for some minutes, he confessed that the news of Miss Bligh's engagement to her cousin had been a disappointment to him, and that he, too, had doubts as to whether it was necessarily irrevocable.

"It is to be remembered, however," he added, that if the young lady should cancel her engagement during her father's lifetime, an alteration in her father's will would be the probable consequence. At present, if I am correctly informed, she has been constituted sole heiress; but that is because she is going to marry a Bligh."

Madame Souravieff was not slow to seize the point of this warning.

"I see," she replied musingly. "And how much longer will Mr. Bligh live, do you suppose?"

The lawyer made a deprecating gesture and laughed.

"We must not allow our attachment to our friends to lead us into wishing for anybody's death," said he, "but I am afraid poor Mr. Bligh is in a very precarious state. Under all the circumstances, I should doubt

whether the marriage would take place for some time to come."

After this he took an early opportunity of withdrawing, having attained his object. It would be all very well for a plotting and contriving woman to suggest schemes to Mark which, though a shade equivocal in themselves, would doubtless be productive of benefit to all concerned in the long run, but a respectable solicitor had better not mix himself up with such transactions.

Madame Souravieff justified his somewhat uncivil estimate of her when she returned home from the party at which they had met; for instead of going to bed she sat up for a considerable length of time hatching plots and contrivances. She was disinterestedly anxious for Mark's advancement in life; but she was also anxious to obtain control over a part of the wealth which must shortly be at Miss Bligh's disposal. No cause can make headway without funds; and although her husband made ample provision for her, her personal expenses were too heavy to allow of her forwarding large or constant remittances to the patriotic persons who appealed to her by almost every post. It was, therefore, most desirable that Mark should be encouraged and stirred up, and there was little hope that that could be done without personal supervision.

"I must go to him," was her conclusion. "One would have liked to finish the season here; but perhaps, after all, it is best to retire at a time when one is sure to be missed. That gives one a better chance of being welcomed when one returns."

On the following morning she was seated at her

writing table by one of the windows, and had already scribbled off the opening sentences of a letter which was destined to prepare Mark for the treat which was in store for him, when she espied on the opposite side of the street the well-known form of Count Souravieff's confidential servant.

"Again!" she exclaimed. "The poor dear man must have lost his head. What can he think that he will gain by sending his spies here now? He must be very badly informed if he doesn't know that Mark left London ages ago!"

But the obsequious Victor, who was ushered into her presence a few minutes later, after he had rung at the door and had been granted the interview which he respectfully craved, was able to show that his present visit was paid in a more honourable capacity than that with which she had credited him.

"*Madame la Comtesse* is mistaken," said he, in reply to her first contemptuous remark; "*Monsieur le Comte* has not sent me here to make any report to him, but simply to deliver a message on his behalf."

"That is a very regal fashion of communicating with me. However, since it amuses him—And what is your message, pray?"

"*Madame la Comtesse* will perhaps allow me to make a little explanation. It appears that Madame has had a great deal of success in London (one would expect no less!), that she has been very well received by the Ministers of the Queen, and that she has—how shall I express it?—produced impressions which may possibly influence the future foreign policy of this country."

Madame Souravieff bent her head and smiled slightly; this tribute to her political importance did not displease her.

"Rumours of this," continued Victor, "have reached us in our retirement and have, I regret to say, had a disquieting effect on *Monsieur le Comte*."

"Impossible, my good Victor," returned Madame Souravieff, "that you can regret that more than I do. Convey the assurance of my sympathy to your master, and at the same time beg him to believe that any change which I may be able to bring about in the foreign policy of this country will not be to the disadvantage of my own."

Victor said that the patriotism of Madame was above suspicion and must be patent to everybody. Unfortunately, however, *Monsieur le Comte* was extremely sensitive upon the subject of unauthorised diplomacy, and for some time past he had feared that Madame's activity—doubtless praiseworthy in itself—might not be receiving the countenance or support of the Russian ambassador at the Court of St. James's. These fears had recently been confirmed in an unpleasant manner by a communication from St. Petersburg, in which *Monsieur* had been sharply rebuked and had been invited to exercise his domestic authority without delay. It was not considered desirable, *Monsieur* had been informed, that private individuals should claim the privilege of speaking, however indirectly, in the name of His Majesty the Czar. Such presumption could not be tolerated and must cease.

"*Madame la Comtesse* will perceive," observed

Victor in conclusion, "that the language used was very peremptory."

This was not welcome hearing to Madame Souravieff, who had many irons in the fire, and was well aware that some of her schemes must of necessity be disavowed and ignored by the accredited representatives of her country, yet whose influence in high circles had been largely due to the circumstance that those accredited representatives had seemed to take a benevolent interest in her.

"Well," she said sharply, "and afterwards?"

The valet raised his shoulders and displayed the palms of his hands.

"With all submission," answered he, "my orders are to see that *Madame* leaves London forthwith."

"And if I refuse?"

"In that case, there will remain the means of persuasion that *Madame* knows of."

Nothing could be more cogent. It is useless to dispute the commands of those who have control over the supplies, and although Madame Souravieff was not devoid of power (because it was open to her to return to her husband and make herself so abominably disagreeable to him that he would offer her any money to go away again), he was evidently able to enforce her departure from London. As she had already almost made up her mind to depart, this did not distress her much; but of course she made a great grievance of it. It was impossible, she said, to take oneself off like that from one moment to another; she must at least have a week in which to find some shelter. She had thought of spending the summer very quietly in some remote coun-

try district. Would that arrangement be considered satisfactory? It was not, she presumed, intended to banish her from England altogether.

Victor, trying to conceal his surprise at this sudden surrender, replied that he believed this plan would satisfy *Monsieur*.

"It is not impossible," continued Madame Souravieff, "that I may take a country house belonging to Mr. Chetwode."

The valet raised his eyebrows.

"A thousand pardons, *Madame,*" said he; "but is it permitted to me to inquire whether the master of the house would remain in it?"

"Certainly not; and if you ever dare to make such an insolent speech to me again I will take measures to make you regret it. I have already bribed you, and I could at any time obtain your dismissal: you must be aware of that. Nevertheless, you had better not disturb the Count's mind by mentioning to him the name of the gentleman whose house I propose to take. Here is some money for you."

She tossed him a bank-note (one of the Count's bank-notes) and dismissed him with the remark that he would probably be able to report the completion of his mission within a week. Then she sat down and began a long letter to Mark Chetwode.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MARK'S TENANT.

From the day when Mark Chetwode admitted to himself his love for Cicely, he had no other wish than to leave Abbotsport for ever. He was not a vain man, but he hated to be ridiculous; and every time that he thought of his recent self-confidence he experienced a twinge about the region of the heart, which was caused almost as much by mortification as by the misery of unrequited love. How could he have been so fatuous?—he who prided himself upon his dispassionate judgment and freedom from illusions of any kind. He stood before the looking-glass and shrugged his shoulders in dismal derision of the image he saw reflected there. What a lined, unattractive, tired-looking face! How absurd to imagine that it is possible to fall in love with anything except beauty, or at the very least, youth! Intellectually he was perhaps Archie Bligh's superior, but physically he was beyond measure the inferior of that stalwart young fellow, and he had been an utter fool not to recognise his inferiority as well as its inevitable consequences.

With these reflections and others of a like nature to occupy him, his customary calm philosophy soon gave way to the irritable despair of a caged animal. He was dying to get away; but how could he get away

without money and with that useless millstone of a house about his neck? It is even possible that there may have been yet another cause for his lingering at Upton Chetwode, and that, although he had abandoned all hope, he still hungered and thirsted for the sight of Cicely's face. That somewhat doubtful boon seemed, however, to be unattainable. The family at the Priory were, of course, living in the strictest retirement, and when he had called once to inquire after Mr. Bligh's health—upon which occasion he was not invited to enter the house—he felt that he had no excuse for further intrusion.

Chance was kind, or unkind, to him at length on a sunny afternoon when, strolling through one of the woods which bordered his property, he was brought face to face with Miss Bligh, who was returning home from the Rectory. She could not very well pass him without speaking, nor, for the matter of that, did such appear to be her wish. She looked more beautiful than ever, he thought, in her deep mourning, which threw up the clear whiteness of her skin, and although she was a little grave, she did not affect the subdued manner usual with those who have experienced a recent bereavement. About that bereavement nothing was said; she spoke principally of her father, who, as she declared with an eagerness which betrayed misgiving, was very much better than he had been.

Not without hesitation did Mark make up his mind to ask whether the rumour which had reached him of her betrothal to her cousin was correct. He looked her full in the face while he put the question, and a

faint flush mounted into her cheeks. But she replied without embarrassment:—

"Yes, it is true that we are engaged. We haven't given it out publicly, because the engagement may very likely be a long one. I couldn't think of leaving Papa until he is stronger."

Mark made use of some conventional phrases, for which she thanked him, and then came a pause. Perhaps his next observation was not in very good taste, but he had an intense desire to know for certain whether this match was one of love or convenience. So he said:—

"In England and America, but nowhere else as far as I know, ladies are understood to have the privilege of consulting their own inclinations in the matter of marriage; but I have been told that this right is not invariably respected. I hope it has been in your case."

Thereupon she flushed again, and this time a good deal more deeply.

"If you knew me a little better," she replied, "you would hardly doubt that, I think. And," she added, with a perceptible touch of indignation in her tone, "if anybody has been telling you—that sort of thing will be said, I daresay—that I am being forced into this marriage for family reasons, you may contradict your informant upon my authority."

Well, that at any rate was explicit and conclusive enough.

It was on the following day that Mark wrote that despairing letter to Mr. Wingfield which, as we have seen, brought about, for one of its consequences, Madame Souravieff's determination to become his tenant. The

announcement of this determination, which was expressed in a thoroughly characteristic style, reached him shortly afterwards.

"I take your house for three months from this day," Madame Souravieff wrote; "therefore make your arrangements accordingly. Do not, however, include your exit from the neighbourhood of Abbotsport among them, or the bargain is void. I know you, my dear Mark; you are like one of those strategists who withdraw their forces as soon as they perceive that they have been beaten according to the rules of war. The people who win battles don't trouble their heads about the rules of war. They go on fighting, and then, lo and behold! it turns out that the rules of war, like other rules, have exceptions. I am one of those people, and as you are under my orders (at least, you profess to be) you will oblige me by standing your ground until I give you the signal to advance and gain the victory.

"I do not ask you to remain in your own house as my guest; that you never would consent to do, and I admit that the arrangement would present difficulties. But you will easily find quarters near at hand.

"We will not have a formal lease, please; only tell me what I am to pay. The other day I was offered a house in the country for the summer months at a rent of thirty guineas a week. Will that do? I do not choose to give less—which you will almost certainly tell me to do—but of course I will willingly give more."

Then followed instructions that no preparations were to be made for her reception. She would send her own servants down a few days in advance, and they would see to all that was necessary.

It was not immediately that Mark decided to accept this very liberal offer. For one thing it denied him just what he wanted, freedom and escape; added to which, he shrank from the idea of being compelled to simulate a worn-out love and dissimulate a new and far more ardent one. But in truth the offer was difficult to refuse. He could put forward no reason for refusal which would be considered valid for a moment; and besides, in spite of himself, the cheery self-reliance of the woman who had so long held sway over him moved him a little. There was, after all, something in what she said; battles are never lost until they are won. It even occurred to him as a possibility that he might be bold and confess the true state of affairs. Feminine nature is a curious thing, and have there not been instances of women who have helped the man who once loved them to marry somebody else? But he soon dismissed this preposterous idea—*une idée saugrenue,* as he called it, for he thought more often in French than in English. What seemed a less unreasonable thing to hope for was that, after a time, Madame Souravieff would grant him a short leave of absence, which it would be easy to find some excuse for prolonging. He balanced the *pros* against the *cons* for an hour or thereabouts; but from the first it had been a foregone conclusion that Madame Souravieff would be obeyed, and an intimation that Upton Chetwode would be immediately vacated by its owner was despatched to her when the post went out.

Having thus committed himself, Mark summoned his factotum, to whom he said briefly:—

"Pierre, I have let this house for the summer to Madame Souravieff, and she will take possession at

once. I do not propose to leave the neighbourhood just yet, so you will have to find quarters for me somewhere near."

Pierre observed that suitable quarters might be a little difficult to discover at such short notice.

"We must put up with unsuitable ones then," returned his master. "Anything will do. I am not particular."

He was in reality extremely particular; but for some time past he had been living in a state of discomfort which before his arrival in England had been unknown to him; so that he was to some extent broken in, and was able to submit without a murmur to the prospect of housing himself in the lodgings above Mr. Simpkins the grocer's shop, which were all that the active Pierre could offer him, after a day of search and inquiry.

"It must be confessed that there is an odour of cheese and of something else—I think it must be brown sugar—which penetrates into every part of the house of Simpkins," Pierre said apologetically, "but the rooms themselves are not so bad. It appears that several of the assistant *pasteurs—curés*, he called them—have lived there and have not complained. For the rest, I suppose that Monsieur has not the intention of remaining long in Abbotsport."

Monsieur, who was not given to be communicative, took no notice of the last observation; he merely ordered Pierre to pack up forthwith, and on the ensuing morning Mr. Simpkins bustled out into the street in his shirt-sleeves and a white apron to receive the gentleman upon whom he now remembered with regret that he

had lately been somewhat severe while discharging a public duty.

"No fault of mine, sir," he took occasion to explain. "Personally I was dead against saying anything of the kind; but until you've served on a jury you can't form no idea of the hobstinacy of some jurymen, sir. We have to humour 'em a bit or we shouldn't get no verdict at all."

"I assure you I never thought of attaching the smallest importance to the proceedings of any of you," answered Mark urbanely. "Pray don't let me keep you away from your business any longer now."

Simpkins, therefore, had to retire without finding out anything about the foreign lady who had so suddenly and incomprehensibly been seized with a fancy for Upton Chetwode. He avenged himself during the remainder of the day by telling his customers that for his part he didn't believe the mysterious stranger to be no lady at all, and that foreigners were a miserable, half-starved lot at best. "Poor Mr. Morant, he was a gentleman and kep' up what I call a proper establishment; but one can't 'ardly 'ope to see another like him in that tumbledown old place."

This, however, was a hasty and prejudiced assumption, as Mr. Simpkins was the first to admit when Madame Souravieff arrived with an imposing escort of domestics and sent him an order for groceries which caused his round eyes to goggle like a toad's. The political interests of Russia do not, unfortunately, coincide altogether with ours, and this inclines many of us to be more alive to Russian defects than to Russian virtues; but nobody can deny these people the merit of

spending their money freely. It is a fine quality, and every true Briton appreciates it.

Mark was familiar with Madame Souravieff's regal way of doing things, and her faculty for making herself very comfortable wherever she went, but even he was amazed when he went to pay his respects to her and saw the transformation which a few days had effected in his dilapidated mansion.

"You are marvellous!" he exclaimed. "Nobody in the world but you could work these miracles. How do you contrive it?"

"Nobody but a nomad knows how to pitch a tent," she answered, laughing; "but when once the trick has been acquired it is simple enough. If I never had any more marvellous feats to perform than a little arrangement of upholstery, perhaps I should not look as old for my age as I do."

He made the requisite rejoinder, and then observed that she had now undertaken a feat which looked to him very like an impossibility.

"Well," said she, "that is what remains to be seen. I admit that it will be impossible unless you help me, and we shall have to go to work with a good deal of caution. Luckily, there is no need for haste. The old gentleman must die in the belief that his daughter will marry her cousin; otherwise you would risk losing the estates altogether."

Mark pulled a wry face.

"I don't think we shall succeed," he said. "Is it worth while to be dishonourable and then to fail?"

"Oh, if you begin to make objections at the outset!"

"I don't wish to make objections; but I have a prejudice in favour of keeping my hands clean."

"You can wash them as soon as you have done your work. It is chiefly for that purpose that soap and water and religious creeds exist. The work of the world isn't clean work, as you ought to know. You belong to societies which are not over-scrupulous in the means that they employ to secure their ends."

"Do I? Well, I suppose I do. But then they never secure their ends, and so far as I know, they seldom go beyond talking of the means. At any rate, they have never asked me to asassinate anybody."

"They might, though."

"Yes, that is a pleasing reflection. But public and private affairs don't stand upon quite the same footing, do they?"

Madame Souravieff made an impatient gesture.

"Let us understand one another, Mark," said she. "You have an opportunity now which does not come twice in a lifetime. If you don't care to take advantage of it, tell me so, and you will spare me a good deal of trouble. But if you will be content to do as I tell you, the remainder of your life will most likely be much happier than mine. Do you think I never look forward to the future? Do you think that, if I were a selfish woman, I shouldn't prefer to leave you as you are? Only you are too cold and too sceptical to believe that any human being can be disinterested."

He made his peace with her and promised to obey her orders, not seeing that any other course was open to him. He could not tell her why he was sensitive in respect of his dealings with Cicely, and he was afraid

that if he said any more about it she would guess. So he listened to the instructions that she had to give him, and answered to the best of his ability certain shrewd questions which she put to him with regard both to Cicely and to her affianced lover.

"The outlook is more promising than I expected," was her conclusion. "Such a girl as you describe will certainly grow tired of such a man if she has to talk to him and to nobody else every day for weeks together. Your part will be a very easy one at first. You will not obtrude yourself, but you will see her sometimes by accident, and when you do you will take care to let her perceive the difference between a cultivated man of the world and a stupid young soldier. If you could insinuate very discreetly that you were the victim of a hopeless passion, that would do no harm."

For the part assigned to him Mark felt that he possessed special aptitudes, and this made him smile, which pleased Madame Souravieff.

"Come," she exclaimed, "a little courage! You shall be a Russian member of the English Parliament —perhaps even a Russian member of the English Ministry—before I have done with you. Consider the importance of that to me, and it will relieve you from the hard trial of believing that I have nothing to gain by working for you."

CHAPTER XXIV.

MADAME SOURAVIEFF IS CRITICISED.

As may be imagined, the advent of the Russian lady, with her staff of servants, her horses and her carriages, created no small stir in the vicinity of Abbotsport, and everybody wanted very much to know who she was and what in the world she had come there for. Thus it became imperative upon Mrs. Lowndes, in her character of local purveyor of news, to find some answer to questions which were being addressed to her from all quarters, and at the same time to gratify her own pardonable curiosity.

"Robert," said she, "we must call upon this Countess Thingummy. I hope she is all right, though I confess that I have my doubts. But I shall be better able to judge when I see her."

"Do you think she will like to be called upon?" asked the Rector dubiously.

"I really don't know; but that isn't the question."

"What is the question, my dear? Whether she is all right? While that remains uncertain wouldn't it be better for us to avoid risk of contamination by leaving her alone?"

"A parish priest," returned Mrs. Lowndes severely, "cannot be contaminated by visiting his parishioners. Indeed, it is his duty to visit them."

Mr. Lowndes yielded, as he very generally did when there was anything like a difference between him and his wife. It saves wear and tear to give in at first when you know that you will certainly have to give in at last; and so, later in the day, the Rector's pony-chaise was seen cutting up the fresh gravel which had been strewn in front of the entrance of Upton Chetwode.

It was seen, that is to say, by some of Madame Souravieff's retainers, but not by that lady herself, who, being in the drawing-room, the windows of which looked towards another point of the compass, was just the least bit in the world taken aback when her visitors were announced. No surprise, however, was perceptible in her manner of receiving them, and although at first she could not imagine who they were or what they had come for, Mr. Lowndes's clerical garb soon enlightened her.

Of that honest gentleman's esteem she made a speedy conquest. She was not particularly well informed as to Anglican doctrines, but in those of the Orthodox Church (she was much too clever to call it the Orthodox Church) to which she belonged, she was thoroughly posted, and she at once led the conversation into a theological channel which Mr. Lowndes found most interesting.

"Our points of agreement are so many and our differences so comparatively unimportant," said he, after a time, "that I cannot help hoping that the dream of union and reconciliation may be realised some day. With Rome one knows that fraternisation is not possible. Rome won't advance an inch to meet us nor abate one jot of her pretensions. She demands unconditional sur-

render, and that, I think I may say, she will never obtain from the bulk of the English nation."

"Rome," agreed Madame Souravieff solemnly, "is the enemy. But for the Romish clergy we should never have had one half of the trouble that we have had in Poland, and if Austria were not under the thumb of the Pope we should long ago have found some means of reconciling our interests with hers."

"Oh, but if Austria is really under the thumb of the Pope, and if that is the result of her being so, I am afraid, as a loyal Briton, I must say that I am very glad of it," observed the Rector, laughing. "We shouldn't quite like to see you and Austria making an amicable division of Turkey."

This gave Madame Souravieff an opportunity of explaining Russia's true mission in the East, and of pointing out how simple it would be to offer compensation to England, which would render the transfer of Constantinople to a civilised and civilising power a positive advantage to her, instead of a menace. "It is a mere question of common sense and good will," she declared.

Thus the Rector quite forgot to put any personal questions to his interlocutor, not even so much as inquiring what had tempted her down to Abbotsport, while his wife fretted and fumed at the necessity under which she found herself of making conversation with Mark Chetwode. For Mark had been sitting with Madame Souravieff and had looked, as Mrs. Lowndes afterwards declared, "most distinctly caught" on being discovered. In any case, there was not much information to be got out of him.

"A sealed book!" the good lady exclaimed impatiently, when she was once more seated beside her husband in the pony chaise. "One would think he did it on purpose to be aggravating, and indeed I daresay he does. Nothing but 'yes' and 'no,' and sometimes an absurd affectation of ignorance. He didn't know what had induced the Countess to take his house; didn't know how long she meant to stay; didn't know whether he himself was going away or not—didn't know anything, in short! Not that he shows much wisdom in being so reticent; because that makes it pretty plain that he has something to conceal. You remember what I told you, Robert, when he first came down here. I said: 'Depend upon it, there is some entanglement.' Well—there you are!"

"Is Madame Souravieff an entanglement?" asked the Rector, with a tolerant smile, while he flicked the fat pony.

"That, I should think, must be obvious to everybody."

"Oh, well, it wasn't obvious to me. She isn't very young, and it struck me that she was more interested in political and Church matters than anything else. A remarkably well informed and agreeable woman I thought her."

"My dear Robert, of course she's agreeable. As for Church matters, I should like to know what her Church has to say about a wife's duties. She has a husband—that much I did find out. And she usually lives apart from him. And Mr. Chetwode has taken Simpkins's poky little lodgings rather than leave Ab-

botsport while she is here. If these facts don't tell their own tale, I'm very much mistaken."

"Well, my dear, if you know all about it we need not grumble at Chetwode's silence," observed the Rector good-humouredly.

That was the sort of speech which, as Mrs. Lowndes often said, made Robert such a provoking companion at times. He never would understand that things ought to be cleared up. So long as things are not cleared up, how can you tell where you are with people? Besides, she wanted to be able to confirm, or remove, the very natural doubts felt in the neighbourhood.

At the Priory, as elsewhere, the stranger was made the subject of a little discussion; but in that house there could be no present question of calling upon anybody, and as it was understood that Madame Souravieff had only taken Upton Chetwode for the summer, not much conjecture was spent upon her.

"One of Chetwode's Russian friends, I suppose," remarked Mr. Bligh. "I hope she is paying him a good rent; for I suspect that he needs it, poor fellow!"

"It is more likely that he is letting her have the use of the house for nothing; he always seems to me to be a man who cares very little about money," said Miss Skipwith, whose *penchant* for Mark had survived the destruction of the hopes which she had once entertained on his behalf.

But Mr. Bligh did not appear to be greatly interested in Mark or in Madame Souravieff, or indeed in anybody. Ever since the attack which had followed Morton's death he had been singularly apathetic, and

his painful efforts to rouse himself when his daughter was in the room were apparent to everybody except to Cicely, who would not see them.

She closed her eyes to this and other ominous indications of her father's state; but she was less blind with regard to Archie, who had changed in more ways than one. It was not only that he had fits of unaccountable depression, but that he had become nervous and irritable, and, what was still worse, was developing a tendency to be exacting. Now this was just what Cicely had dreaded from the first. She was very fond of him and very unwilling to hurt his feelings, yet, for both their sakes, he ought to be made to understand that that kind of thing would never do, and that he must not look cross or injured if she declined to be always at his beck and call.

One morning, when she was obliged to say that she was too busy to go out riding with him, he turned away with such an impatient movement and sighed so noisily that the right moment seemed to have come for reading him a lecture. This she accordingly did—with results that were not altogether satisfactory. He begged her pardon very humbly; he admitted that he had shown temper and that he ought not to have done so; but he did not quite lay aside his aggrieved air, and that was the one thing that she had wanted him to do.

"The truth is, Archie," she said, "that you are out of sorts; that is what makes you unreasonable. It can't be good for you to live as you are doing now, without any amusement and never seeing other men.

I wish you would go away for a few weeks. Why shouldn't you?"

"If you wish me to go," he answered dolefully, "of course there's no reason why I shouldn't and every reason why I should. How long must I be away?"

"That is silly," returned Cicely, her own temper beginning to give way a little; "you know perfectly well that I only suggest your going away because you evidently need a change. Do just as you like about it, only please don't behave like a spoilt boy."

She left the room without giving him time to make any rejoinder, for she had no intention of quarrelling with him; but her conscience soon began to smite her, and when she next saw him and noticed his woebegone countenance, she felt that she had spoken too sharply. It is not wise to whip a dog or a child or to snub a lover and afterwards to exhibit signs of regret for what you have done. The temptation is sometimes strong, but it should always be resisted by such as desire to retain their authority. Cicely, who was accustomed to authority and tolerably skilful in the exercise of it, was not unaware of this elementary rule; but after all, she had promised to be Archie's wife, and perhaps it was hardly right to trample upon him.

She therefore proceeded to undo the effect of her reproof (which had been really salutary) by saying, with a smile:—

"Haven't you forgiven me yet, Archie? I was very disagreeable this morning, I know, but I want to make friends again now, and I find I shall have time for a short gallop with you, if you don't mind starting rather late."

So Archie went round to the stable-yard to give the necessary orders, and soon after five o'clock they set forth for a certain broad stretch of down that they knew of, where the exhilaration of feeling good horses under them and the rush of the soft westerly wind in their faces soon swept away all remains of discontent or ill-humour.

The very best way of making up a quarrel is doubtless to say no more about it, and the quarrels of lovers are generally supposed to terminate in a manner rather pleasing than otherwise. But of these two persons only one could be called a lover, and for that reason it might possibly have been better if the little scene of the morning had led to a fuller explanation between them. As it was, Cicely still thought that the young man would do well to leave the Priory for a time and amuse himself, while he still thought her proposition a heartless one. For the time being, however, they repressed their respective opinions, and, having thoroughly enjoyed their ride, fell back naturally to those easy terms of comradeship which had subsisted between them prior to their engagement, and the continuance of which was all that Cicely, for her part, desired.

Now, on that same afternoon, as chance would have it, Madame Souravieff, who had brought saddle horses down from London, had persuaded Mark Chetwode to make use of one of them; and so it came to pass that this couple, while jogging homewards, espied another couple ahead of them.

"Nothing could be better!" Madame Souravieff exclaimed, when she had been told who these equestrians were. "We will canter on and overtake them, and

you shall introduce me. I had been wondering how we could contrive to bring about an accidental meeting."

Mark would just as soon have deferred that meeting a little longer; for the idea of bringing his old and his new love together jarred upon him somehow. But of course the thing had to be done sooner or later, and upon this occasion, as it turned out, the two ladies only exchanged a swift mutual glance of curiosity and a few unmeaning words. For four people cannot very comfortably ride abreast, and Madame Souravieff thought it best that she should undertake the young soldier and leave Mark to give evidence of his respectful sympathy with the heiress in this time of domestic trial.

Mark did not do that, being aware that Cicely's domestic sorrows were not of a kind which she cared to talk about, but he bore a previous hint of his mentor's in mind and took some trouble to say clever things without apparent effort. Cicely, who had always liked him and found him interesting, did, as a matter of fact, draw some half-unconscious comparisons between him and her cousin, which could not be to the latter's advantage. She was young; she had been leading a very dull life of late; and it was pleasant to be entertained by one who had seen so much of the world and could talk so amusingly of his varied experiences.

"And now are you going to begin wandering about again?" she asked. "Have you let your house for any length of time?"

"Only for three months, I believe," he answered.

"Indeed I can hardly imagine that Madame Souravieff will care to stay so long."

"Well, that will depend upon what brought her here, won't it? I suppose she wouldn't have taken Upton Chetwode if she hadn't been anxious for a quiet sort of existence."

"To tell you the truth, I suspect that one of her principal reasons was that she wanted to give a little help to an impecunious friend," answered Mark; for he had thought over what he should say upon this subject. "She is a very old friend of mine," he added. "I used to see a great deal of her and Count Souravieff in St. Petersburg."

"And what has become of Count Souravieff? Is he dead?"

"No, but he has a chronic derangement of the liver, which makes him rather a disagreeable person to live in the house with. Besides, his wife holds strong political opinions which he doesn't share. So, as a general rule, he goes his way and she goes hers. It is one of those cases in which no blame attaches to either side, and after a certain time of life people who don't suit one another are wiser to live apart if they can, I think."

Cicely made no comment upon this succinct account of the Russian lady's domestic affairs; but she glanced at the figure in front of her, which looked youthful enough in a riding-habit, and it occurred to her that the time of life referred to by Mark must be reached rather early. Her next question was:—

"Where do you think of going this summer? You

don't intend to spend it above Simpkins's shop, I presume."

"I scarcely know what I intend," he answered candidly. "I wanted to go as soon as I let the house; but I couldn't run away just as Madame Souravieff came; and now——"

"And now you don't think you can run away as long as she remains?" suggested Cicely, after waiting in vain for him to finish his sentence.

"No; if I linger here in spite of the smell of Mr. Simpkins's cheese, it won't be for that reason, I think," he answered, with a laugh which ended in a sigh.

"For what reason, then?" she inquired wonderingly.

"Some day perhaps I may tell you; but it is much more likely that I never shall. In any case it is an absurd reason. Let us talk about something else."

It will be perceived that Mark knew how to carry out instructions. His manner of doing so, which may, perhaps, in narration, give an idea of somewhat rough workmanship, must nevertheless be pronounced to have been successful, inasmuch as he had managed to rouse Cicely's curiosity and even to convey to her a very vague inkling of the truth. It was only a very vague inkling; because, although she was aware that a great many men admired her, she was by no means ready to believe that they loved her. It was, however, quite sufficient for Mark's purpose; and seeing the impression that he had produced, he wisely forbore to deepen it.

Madame Souravieff, in the meantime, had had no difficulty at all with Archie. She sometimes, though not often, found a difficulty in getting on with women, but never with men, and if this one was a little taci-

turn at first, she soon made him loquacious. On reaching the point where their paths diverged, she begged him to come and see her some day, when he had nothing better to do, and took leave of him and Cicely with smiling friendliness, mingled with just so much of formality as is becoming in a lady who has not yet been called upon.

But she became grave when she and Mark were once more alone together. She rode beside him in silence for some little distance and then turned upon him abruptly with the remark which he had been quite sure that she would make.

"Savez-vous qu'elle est furieusement belle, votre héritière?"

"So I told you long ago," he answered dryly.

"No, you said she was pretty—that is a very different thing."

"You are not going to accuse me of having lost my heart to her, I hope," said Mark, turning his impassive face towards his companion.

She gave her shoulders a jerk and laughed.

"Perhaps not. In order to lose one's heart one must first have a heart to lose. Still the fact remains that Miss Bligh is beautiful and—and that I am no longer what I was."

Mark had to reassure her and to drag forth certain long-disused protestations from the recesses of his memory. It was not a pleasant occupation and he did not enjoy it; but when he had done, he had at least the satisfaction of knowing that he had lulled her awakening suspicions. Possibly Madame Souravieff was not unwilling that they should be lulled.

CHAPTER XXV.

SIR PETER SHAKES HIS HEAD.

ARCHIE told Cicely that he thought Madame Souravieff "a very good sort." She had been saying to him, it appeared, how fond she was of Englishmen and English ways; she had a capital seat on a horse, she was surprisingly well-informed as to the strength and efficiency of the British army and had spoken about it in terms of unqualified admiration, the sincerity of which it was impossible to doubt. In short, Archie was free to confess that he never would have expected to find such a combination of estimable qualities in a Muscovite. "She asked me to call upon her some day," he remarked. "Do you think I might go?"

"Why not?" asked Cicely, laughing.

"Well, I wasn't quite sure whether it would be the proper thing. I suppose *you* wouldn't come with me?"

"Not just yet. She will understand that I can't pay visits at present; or if she doesn't understand, you can explain to her."

The little that Cicely had seen and heard of Mark's tenant had not inspired her with any very strong desire to cultivate that lady's acquaintance; but she was only too glad that Archie should have somebody besides herself to exchange ideas with, and she urged him to take advantage of the invitation which he had received.

"You will be doing an act of charity by helping Mr. Chetwode to entertain her," she observed demurely.

Circumstances, however, soon arose which necessitated the indefinite postponement of that charitable act, and caused Cicely to forget that any such person as Madame Souravieff existed. For the very next morning Mr. Bligh's valet came running down stairs, with an alarmed face, to say that he thought the doctor ought to be sent for. His master had had a quiet night and had awoke much as usual, but in the last few minutes there had been what he called "a sudden change," and he was afraid things were going to take a turn for the worse again.

The change of which he spoke, and which could hardly be described as sudden, was simply that which heralds the approach of death; and even Cicely could not deceive herself as to its meaning when she entered her father's bedroom. He was lying back in his chair with his eyes closed, and was apparently in a state of stupor. Every vestige of colour had left his cheeks; his breathing was laboured and irregular; his long, thin fingers twitched convulsively every now and then. It did not need the melancholy air and the solemn circumlocutions of the doctor, who came in all haste, to convince Cicely that the time had come to bid farewell to hope. Nevertheless she insisted upon despatching a telegram to Sir Peter Parsons.

"It is a great expense and will be quite useless," the local practitioner told Archie; "the whole College of Physicians could do no good now."

"But she wishes it," returned the young man: "and

what signifies the expense? It is of no consequence to her."

"That is true, no doubt," assented the other, with rather a wistful sigh (for he could not help thinking what an immense number of people he would have to kill or cure before he could hope to realise such a sum as the great man would receive in return for a comfortable railway-journey and a shake of the head). "If it is any comfort to Miss Bligh to hear the worst upon higher authority than mine, so be it. But I almost doubt whether Sir Peter will be here in time."

Sir Peter arrived in time to fulfil the forecast of his provincial *confrère* by shaking his head, but more than that he could not do, except to promise that he would remain in the house until all was over—which, he added, would be a question of hours only.

"You may remember," he said to Archie, "that I warned you of what must be expected. I would have warned the poor girl also; only it seemed best to spare her the wretchedness of waiting for weeks or months in daily dread of the blow falling."

Sir Peter had doubtless acted mercifully, but Cicely felt as most people feel at such times and was not disposed to be grateful to him for his consideration. She ought to have been told, she thought. Why had she been kept in ignorance while everybody else had been prepared? Why had she been allowed to be cheerful and behave as though the danger were over? It had made her seem cruel to her father, who (as her aunt told her by way of comforting her) had been under no illusion as to his hopeless state. These thoughts,

however, she kept to herself. There was no use now in reproaching people who had meant to be kind; only she wished they would all go away and leave her with her father, who showed no sign of returning consciousness.

But of course they did not go away. They stood about and whispered and crossed the room on tiptoe, in accordance with what would appear to be one of the dictates of human nature. It is difficult to see why one should not be allowed to die alone, since nobody thinks of grudging one the privilege of living alone; but we may as well make up our minds that, unless we have the good fortune to meet with a violent death, the last thing that we shall see in this world will be a circle of faces of preternatural length, and must console ourselves with the reflection that they will resume their usual and more becoming outline very soon after we have left them. To Mr. Bligh it mattered not at all whether many or few spectators witnessed the losing battle which he was fighting, for only his body was engaged in that struggle, his mind having already retired from the field never to return. Before midnight the universal conqueror scored one more victory, and for the first time in the history of an ancient and honourable family the Bligh estates, with all the endowments and responsibilities attaching thereto, passed into the possession of a woman.

When Mr. Bligh had ceased to breathe, others perhaps breathed more freely. They sincerely regretted one who all his life long had had many friends and no enemies; still they had known that he was doomed, and they were not sorry that a painful scene was over,

and they all agreed in praising the courage and composure with which Cicely had passed through it.

With courage she might be credited, for that was a quality inherent in her blood; but her composure gave way as soon as she had reached her bedroom, where she threw herself face downwards upon a sofa and so lay, sobbing miserably, until Nature obtained the mastery over her and brought her an hour or two of sleep. Nature always has the last word, though she sometimes allows us to fancy that we can command her. Nature goes quietly on with her ceaseless work of destruction and renewal, brings us health and sickness and death, makes us sad and then merry again, whether we will or no. Mercifully, however, we are so constituted that in moments of excitement or emotion we cannot believe this. We very often speak of love as eternal, occasionally meaning what we say: and when those whom we have loved most are taken from us, we almost always feel certain that our wounds cannot at any future time be wholly cured or cease to pain us. Cicely, at any rate, had somewhat better reasons than most of us have in times of bereavement for thinking that she could never again be as happy as she had been. A dispassionate outsider might have told her that it was extremely probable that she never would. Her father's death must of necessity draw a sharp line across the course of her life, concluding the first portion of it, which had been exceptionally free from cares of any kind. From that day forth she would have to bear upon her shoulders the burden of duties which women seldom discharge satisfactorily, and she was engaged to be married to a man of whom it might safely be pre-

dicted that he would give her assistance in matters of detail only. Mr. Lowndes had once told him that whoever married Cicely Bligh must resign himself to accept the part of prince-consort. It is a difficult part to play, demanding an even temper, much tact and not a little forbearance.

But of course it was not the prospect of the future in this sense that overwhelmed Cicely with sorrow. What was so terrible to her was that her father should have left her without one word of farewell, and that her last words to him should have been careless words, expressing no anxiety about him, nor anything of the affection which, as it seemed to her, was the one strong sentiment of which she had been or ever would be capable. It may have been from some undefined fear lest Archie should imagine that he could offer her in his own proper person a substitute for what she had lost, or it may have been because his attempts to comfort her were not very adroit, that she avoided him during the days which followed and gave him to understand that she preferred the companionship of her Aunt Susan, who was tearful and sympathetic, yet perplexed by behaviour which struck her as unnatural.

It was after Mr. Bligh's coffin had been laid beside that of his son, and the family lawyer had come and gone, and the blinds at the Priory had been pulled up again, that Miss Skipwith imparted some of her misgivings to the Rector of the parish. She said:—

"My heart fails me about Cicely. She doesn't care for that young man, and it is useless for her to pretend that she does."

"My dear Madam, what can have put such a notion

as that into your head?" cried Mr. Lowndes, who did not think highly of Miss Skipwith's intelligence. "As far as I can judge, the young people are simply devoted to one another."

"Oh, yes; but you are only a man and you can't judge," returned Miss Skipwith, with unwonted sharpness. "You don't live in the house either; so you haven't seen how she has shrunk from him and kept him at arm's length ever since her great sorrow came upon her."

"If that is all, I don't think you need be much alarmed," said the Rector. "Trouble affects a great many people like physical pain and makes them dislike to be touched or approached. I can quite understand her feeling."

"I am by no means sure that you do," returned Miss Skipwith, shaking her head. "She isn't sensitive in the way that you suppose; it seems to be a relief to her to talk about her father and about the past and the future. Only it is to me, not to him, that she speaks. Say what you will, that is not the way in which any girl would treat the man whom she loved."

"Well, but if she doesn't love him why should she have accepted him?"

"We know that these mistakes are not uncommon: it is very fortunate when they are discovered in time to be repaired. My own feeling is that the young man ought to go away. The marriage cannot take place for many months to come, and——"

"Why can't it?" interrupted the Rector.

"Because Cicely wouldn't hear of such a thing; nor would it be proper. Indeed, I am not at all clear that

it is proper for him to stay on in the house, under the circumstances. What do you think?"

"I don't see the harm of his being here, so long as Cicely has you to act as her chaperon," answered the Rector; "but I don't set up to be an authority upon such points. I'll ask Mrs. Lowndes if you like."

This kind offer Miss Skipwith declined with more promptitude than appreciation. She did not want to be taught her duty by Mrs. Lowndes, though she would have been willing to accept advice from her parish priest, had it been of a nature to lend support to her own views. Apparently, however, he was not to be counted upon as an ally; so in the course of a few days she adopted what, after all, was the most straightforward plan and attacked Cicely personally.

"My dear child," said she, when she had led up to the subject by various preliminary circlings and doublings, "you are only laying up unhappiness for yourself. You have a strong feeling of attachment for your cousin, which I don't say he may not deserve, but you cannot deceive me into supposing that you care for him as a wife should care for her husband."

"What makes you say that, Aunt Susan?" asked Cicely, raising her heavy eyes, with a wondering and startled look.

"It is obvious," replied the old lady; "he himself must see it. All this time you have been giving yourself the greatest trouble to keep him at a distance; and if you don't know why you have been doing that, I can tell you. Believe me, it would be wiser and kinder—though it may not be pleasant—to confess to him at once that you do not love him."

This, as we know, was a confession that Cicely had already made; but she did not feel inclined to repeat it to her aunt, by whom it was likely to be misunderstood. Nevertheless, she might have thought of some rather more judicious rejoinder than:—

"You don't lose any time in asking me to do what would have distressed Papa more than anything else. It was his one great wish that I should marry Archie, and you may be sure that he would never have wished me to do that if he hadn't been convinced that I should be happy as Archie's wife."

"Exactly so," agreed Miss Skipwith, seizing the weapon offered to her; "that is precisely my feeling about it. If your poor father had seen what I have seen, he would have been the first to say what I have just said."

"You think you see things because you want to see them, Aunt Susan," returned Cicely. "If I have seemed unkind to Archie, I am very sorry for it; but I hope he has made some allowance for me. Such as I am, I believe he is not dissatisfied with me; and if he ever is, it will be for him to complain, not for other people. Please say no more about it."

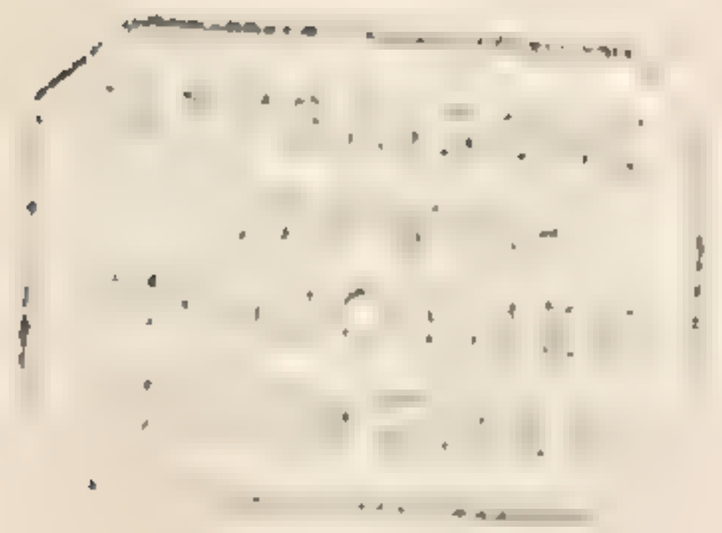
Miss Skipwith was easily cowed, and when her niece looked at her after a certain fashion she invariably succumbed. All she ventured to ask was:—

"And is he to remain in this house until your wedding-day? It is your house now, you must remember, and he is here as your guest."

"He is a very welcome one," answered Cicely. "Whether he stays or goes must be as he pleases; he certainly will not be turned out by me."

This closed a discussion which had not helped Miss Skipwith's case, but from which that of Archie derived indirect benefit. For Cicely now saw that she had put his patience and his submissiveness to a somewhat too severe test, and from that day she began once more to exert herself to please him. She began also to exert herself in other ways, and though her heart was still heavy, her speech resumed something of its customary cheerfulness and decision.

END OF VOL. I.



PRINTING OFFICE OF THE PUBLISHER.

June 1891.

Tauchnitz Edition.

Latest Volumes:

2736. A Scarlet Sin. By Florence Marryat.
2735. The Smuggler's Secret. By Frank Barrett.
2734. Winchester Meads. By Emma Marshall.
2732/33. The Blacksmith of Voe. By Paul Cushing.
2731. Extenuating Circumstances and A French Marriage. By F. C. Philips.
2729/30. New Grub Street. By George Gissing.
2728. Noughts and Crosses. By Q.
2727. Recha. By Dorothea Gerard.
2726. Sunny Stories and Some Shady Ones. By James Payn.
2724/25. Eight Days. By R. E. Forrest.
2723. Khaled. By F. Marion Crawford.
2722. The Hired Baby. A Street-Romance. By Marie Corelli.
2721. The Duchess. By the Author of "Molly Bawn."
2719/20. Kirsteen. By Mrs. Oliphant.
2718. A Maiden Fair to See. By F. C. Philips & C. J. Wills.
2717. A Winter's Tale. By Mary E. Mann.
2716. A Draught of Lethe. By Roy Tellet.
2715. A Sappho of Green Springs, etc. By Bret Harte.
2713/14. An Old Maid's Love. By Maarten Maartens.
2712. A Diplomat's Diary. By Julien Gordon.
2710/11. Stand Fast, Craig-Royston! By William Black.
2709. The Greatest Thing in the World; Pax Vobiscum; The Changed Life. By Prof. Henry Drummond.
2707/8. Knight-Errant. By Edna Lyall.
2705/6. Consequences. By Egerton Castle.
2704. Two Penniless Princesses. By Charlotte M. Yonge.
2702/3. Armorel of Lyonesse. By Walter Besant.

A complete Catalogue of the Tauchnitz Edition is attached to this work.

Bernhard Tauchnitz, Leipzig;

And sold by all booksellers

BSB Bayerische StaatsBibliothek

MDZ Münchener DigitalisierungsZentrum Digitale Bibliothek

Norris, William Edward

Misadventure in 2 vol

Bd.: 1

1891

P.o.angl. 251 at-11
urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb11664759-7